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MEMORY POLITICS AND RURAL TOPONYMIC CHANGE IN KAZAKHSTAN

Abstract. Between 1991 and 2024 more than eight hundred rural settlements in Kazakhstan changed their names. This article treats that record not as a series of routine administrative acts but as a sustained reworking of symbolic and linguistic space after independence. The study draws on the full corpus of 1188 official renaming decisions, of which 824 concern rural settlements. A clear pattern emerges. Ideological and personal names of the Soviet period were withdrawn and replaced by Kazakh names taken mostly from landscape, local history and cultural tradition. The work was carried out by regional representative and executive bodies. The evidence shows that renaming went well beyond administrative form, because local history was restored, historical narratives were rewritten and the official framework of spatial self-understanding was reshaped. The process was uneven in time and across regions, ranging from 34,5% of the settlement of Turkestan to under 4% in the northern regions. The article argues that rural renaming amounts to an institutional reshaping of the memory space.

Keywords: nation building, memory of community, local communities, national identity.

Әлихан Шәкенов, Татьяна Дронзина ЖАДТЫ САҚТАУ САЯСАТЫ ЖӘНЕ ҚАЗАҚСТАНДАҒЫ АУЫЛДЫҚ ТОПОНИМИЯНЫ ӨЗГЕРТУ

Анатпа. 1991-2024 жылдар аралығында Қазақстанның сегіз жүзден астам ауылдық елді мекендері атауларын өзгертті. Мақалада әдеттегі әкімшілік актілер сериясы ретінде емес, тәуелсіздік алғаннан кейін символдық және лингвистикалық кеңістікті тұрақты қайта өңдеу ретінде қарастырылады. Зерттеу атауын өзгерту туралы 1188 ресми шешімнің толық жиынтығына негізделген, оның 824-і ауылдық елді мекендерге қатысты. Айқын үлгі пайда болады. Кеңестік кезеңдегі идеологиялық және жеке есімдер алынып тасталды ал олардың орнына ландшафт, өлкетану және мәдени дәстүрлерден алынған қазақша атаулар берілді. Жұмысты жергілікті өкілді және атқарушы органдар жүргізді. Жиналған материалдарға сәйкес атауды өзгерту әкімшілік шекарадан әлдеқайда шықты. Себебі өлкетану қалпына келтірілді, тарихи әңгімелер қайта жазылды және кеңістіктік өзін-өзі түсінудің ресми шеңбері қайта құрылды. Бұл үрдіс барлық аймақтарда біркелкі болмады. Мысалы: Түркістандағы елді мекендерінің 34,5% ал солтүстік аймақтарда 4% ғана. Мақалада ауылдық жерлердің атауын өзгерту жад кеңістігінің институционалды өзгеруін білдіреді.

Түйін сөздер: ұлттық құрылыс, қауымдастықтардың жады, жергілікті қауымдастықтар, ұлттық сәйкестендіру.

Алихан Шакенов, Татьяна Дронзина
ПОЛИТИКА СОХРАНЕНИЯ ПАМЯТИ И ИЗМЕНЕНИЕ СЕЛЬСКОЙ
ТОПОНИМИИ В КАЗАХСТАНЕ

Аннотация. В период с 1991 по 2024 год более восьмисот сельских населенных пунктов Казахстана сменили свои названия. В данной статье этот документ рассматривается не как ряд рутинных административных актов, а как последовательная переработка символического и языкового пространства после обретения независимости. Исследование основано на полном объеме 1188 официальных решений о переименовании, из которых 824 касаются сельских населенных пунктов. Прослеживается четкая закономерность. Идеологические и личные названия советского периода были изъяты и заменены казахскими названиями, взятыми в основном из ландшафта, местной истории и культурных традиций. Работа проводилась региональными представительными и исполнительными органами. Факты показывают, что переименование вышло далеко за рамки административной формы, поскольку была восстановлена местная история, переписаны исторические нарративы и изменены официальные рамки пространственного самопонимания. Этот процесс был неравномерным по времени и по регионам: от 34,5% в Туркестанской области и до менее 4% в северных регионах. В статье утверждается, что переименование сельских районов представляет собой институциональное изменение пространства памяти.

Ключевые слова: национальное строительство, коллективная память, местные сообщества, национальная идентичность.

Introduction

In post-soviet states one of methods of nation-building was renaming of settlements, that we can see from open data on internet resources. Renaming of settlements - an illustration of continuing transformations of political power, language policy and culture of Kazakhstan. Behind sequential renaming of settlements there is a huge task of the republic. The government seeks to strengthen national identity and develop the Kazakh language, starting with local communities. It is not formal activities, however systematic and targeted activity conducted since early days of independence – fight against forgetting and erasing identity.

Names including geographical names and localities, have a much deeper meaning and application. They preserve and carry the code of cultural and historical heritage, as well as preserve the results of past regimes of power, social and cultural changes. They often outlive those who shaped them for a long time. That is why they are valuable, they remind people of the story they use every day. As a consequence, place-names have by now established local history and recalled the society to the past, further more - people keep their memories and are secure at home. In that sense renaming of settlements is once again about creating an erased history, severing links to the Soviet legacy. Creation of new local memory coincides with tasks of national building on the level of communities.

In rural areas, the results of renaming are particularly noticeable. As villages and small settlements are very closely connected with traditions, culture and history of local importance. Therefore, the name change has a huge impact on them, as they feel it most acutely, unlike urban residents. Urban residents may find the name

change abstract because they do not notice it in the daily hustle and bustle, but rural residents encounter it daily. The new name brings household chores associated with changing documents, and it also affects their local identity and history. And here it is clearly visible how government policy affects the daily lives of residents.

In Kazakhstan the renaming of localities indicates cultural, linguistic, and ideological changes. Names related to the Soviet period are no longer relevant. At the same time, they are being replaced by names in the Kazakh language or Kazakh historical figures are being restored, for example, batyrs, khans, biys, etc. In order to form and strive for ideological, cultural and historical independence, to create a national identity with a revision of the history of the state. At the same time this kind of change provokes a mixed attitude both by public opinion and regions. So renamings can be very different among themselves, and they have different effects on local communities. The study combines a quantitative analysis of the complete corpus of official renaming decisions with an interpretive reading of the categories of names that were withdrawn and those that were introduced. Its purpose is to establish how new toponyms have reorganised the institutional framework within which historical, cultural and local identity is publicly articulated in independent Kazakhstan.

The article reveals the trends, dynamics and structural transformations of the toponymy of Kazakhstan between 1991 and 2024. Only rural settlements are considered auls, villages, railway settlements and wintering camps and the analysis addresses the way in which their renaming has institutionally reshaped the memory space that frames local self-identification. It is necessary to specify the epistemic status of this claim at the outset. The empirical base of the study consists of administrative and normative-legal documents. The article therefore does not measure the mentality, attitudes or subjective perceptions of rural residents, and no sociological survey or localised interviews were conducted for this purpose. What the sources permit is an analysis of the institutional reshaping of the memory space that is, of the officially sanctioned repertoire of names through which the past is made publicly visible at the settlement level, and which establishes the framework within which local identity is subsequently negotiated in everyday practice. Statistical methods are used to describe the ideological, linguistic, chronological and regional structure of this process. The aim of the study is accordingly to determine the function of toponyms in the institutional preservation, erasure and reconstruction of history, culture and local identity in post-Soviet Kazakhstan.

Methodology

Material basis of research is the decision of akimat, masilihat of local levels – districts, cities and regions of certain region for years from 1991 to 2024. Altogether 1188 instances of renaming were identified, among them 824 cases (69,4%) refer to rural settlements – auls, village, wintering camps, railway settlements. The choice of rural settlements was not accidental. Here community ties with national identification, memory, socio-cultural organization of society are most intimate. Changes in toponymy are much more noticeable. The sources of the collected materials are official decisions of local executive and representative bodies. Based on this data, a qualitative analysis of changes can be built.

Under the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan «On the administrative-territorial structure of the Republic of Kazakhstan», a village can only be renamed by a joint decision of the regional maslikhat and akimat. This was true in every version of the law that applied during the years we studied. District bodies and village akims may

propose a renaming, but they cannot carry it out. On their own they may rename only streets and similar features inside a settlement, which we do not study here. One renaming leaves a trail of documents at several levels, so we counted each renaming once, using the oblast decision that actually made the change. Earlier documents were read as part of the same case. We counted every rural place that was renamed, whatever its formal label at the time village, settlement, farm centre, wintering camp or railway settlement. These labels changed repeatedly over thirty years, and for the people living there the change of name was the same event. For this reason the percentages in Table 1 show how intensively renaming proceeded in each region, and should not be read as exact proportions of one identical set of places.

All former names assigned during the Soviet period were divided into three groups. The first group comprises settlements named after historical, political and military figures. The second group comprises names carrying explicit ideological content and Soviet political symbolism. The third group consists of neutral or geographical names derived from a local natural or climatic feature.

It should be noted that the recording of names in the source documents was not standardised: a single commemorative name appears in the decisions as Lenin, Lenino, Lenin Zholy, V. Lenin, V. I. Lenin and so on. The material was therefore normalised into subgroups, so that orthographic and morphological variants of one anthroponym were counted together rather than fragmented across several entries. This preserves the reliability of the frequency counts. The same normalisation procedure was applied to the new names, which appear in the documents either in Kazakh orthography or in Kazakh with Russian transcription, for example: (Тәуелсіздік / Tauelsizdik).

The new names were classified in the same three categories as the old ones. The first covers settlements named after a historical person, among them khans, batyrs, biys, politicians, scholars and cultural figures. The second covers names with an explicit ideological meaning, such as Egemen or Birlik. The third covers neutral names tied to the natural setting and climate of the place or to local history and tradition. Such a division allowed us to make comparison between features of old Soviet names and new Kazakh ones. Basis of the article is research on the dynamics of toponymy, statistical analysis and comparative assessment of indicators during the studied period, as well as comparing different regions through revealing trends. The results enable us to draw reasonable conclusions regarding evolution of the toponymic system of Kazakhstan and its impact on the socio-politico-culture sphere.

The way this study is built gives it both its strengths and its limits. Because we worked from official acts rather than a sample, we cover every renaming that was legally carried out in these years, and we can see exactly how the state itself sorted and labelled space. But official documents record decisions, not what people made of them. They cannot tell us how residents understood a new name, whether it caught on in daily speech, or whether the old name lived on informally in conversation, in how a village described itself, in postal or commercial use. So when this article speaks of memory and identity, it means the official level: the memory landscape as the state inscribed it, not what changed inside people's heads. Answering that second question would take fieldwork, oral-history interviews and surveys in the villages themselves, and we suggest it below as a next step. The distinction matters. A renaming decision sets the frame for public remembrance, whether a particular community takes that frame as its own is a separate question, and it needs separate evidence.

Literature Review

For Kazakhstan, the formation of toponymy plays a key role. The state language policy plays a significant role. It is aimed at restoring the former geographical names and popularizing and expanding the use of the state language among other ethnic groups living in the country and being citizens of Kazakhstan. According to Akizhanova et al. (2024), in the most cultures, proper names are the basis for designating a single unique thing, and place names absorb historical and geographical knowledge. A toponym contains and transports valuable information about the region, geography, civilization, history and culture of the area through time and is certainly a form of intangible culture heritage (Capra et al., 2016). In modern national construction, one of the key elements of construction is historical memory, which is studied by the theory of statehood. Such memory provides identity, creates a unified sense of belonging and a sense of joint movement in history for the national community (Kotlyar and Ahieieva-Karkashadze, 2026). The toponymy of Kazakhstan has been developing for a long time. The movements of people, cultural interactions, economic changes, and the period of colonization have all left traces in toponymy. Geographical names from the past reflect local culture, memory about settlements, conflicts and harmonious communities (Nurdauletova et al., 2024).

Besides, geographic names are essential for orientation, route-finding, and organizing human activities (Faričić et al., 2023). As regards to the post-Soviet Kazakh identity, scholars note its dual character – while the state encourages building up an all-inclusive Kazakh identity, it at the same time pays attention to the ethnic status of Kazakhs (Surucu, 2002), thus forming a dualism.

Place names are closely intertwined with memory and power. Political elites have repeatedly resorted to using symbolic space to legitimize their power. To do this, they often replaced existing ideas about the past with a narrative that reflected their own ideological attitudes (Ruipérez Núñez and Dinas, 2023). As Halbwachs (2001) noted, social memory has a spatial nature, and space acts as one of the key channels for the transmission of collective memory from generation to generation. Schwartz (1996) considered memory as a cultural system that simultaneously reflects society and has a formative effect on it. Toponymy, therefore, acts as a reflection of territorial identity and political activities aimed at its restoration (Bishi et al., 2022).

As researchers argue, urban toponymy is considered a memory space in which competing social groups struggle over whose interpretation of the past will become public (Alderman 2002). Name of any locality reflects changes in history, culture and languages in it. Etymological study of toponyms gives us intriguing data on the history and culture of that area. Renaming of settlements is creating new cultural-political, linguistic space by means of building up a new architecture and new legal relations of subjects (Monmonier, 2018; Toal et al., 2014). Consequently, there emerges a map which better mirrors political rhetoric than local collective memory (Rees et al., 2021). All Soviet toponymy was intended to memorialize.

Ideology was encoded in imagery of soviet leaders, revolutionaries, soldiers (Vendina and Karpenko, 2023). Moreover, terms like «Soviet», «Communist» or «October» were instrumental for shaping ideology and collective memory (Stefany, 2013; Kaşıkçı, 2019). After gaining independence, Kazakhstan began the process of renaming. In general, the renaming is aimed at forming a new state ideology and replacing the Soviet ideology (Rysbergen, 2017). Such measures show efforts to form a new statehood and national identity (Temirbayeva et al., 2022), sanctioned from the side of the state and society (Hubner and Dirksmeier, 2023). The post-

Soviet settlements' names have been altered in accordance with the Kazakh traditions, language and nationhood (David et al., 2024)

In terms of the sociolinguistic system, toponyms have great significance for the construction of culture space; they possess symbolic and performative value, connecting spatial sense with maps (Duncan, 2022; Rose-Redwood, 2008). The renaming of places is not usually done casually. It has much relation with decolonization, nation-building, ideology change etc. In order to reconstruct historical memory and consolidate regional identity (Feng et al., 2019; Luo, 2018). Critical toponymy is concerned with memory and associates place-names with wider social and political shifts, highlighting their importance within such contexts (Rose-Redwood et al., 2010). In times of political turmoil - revolution, war, regime change – there are waves of renaming. These waves serve at once as cause and effect of these events (Zimovets, 2025). These kinds of processes may alter the collective memory and transform a society's sense of identity (Alderman, 1996).

An illustration of such dynamics can be seen in post-Soviet countries. Russia's name has been used in Kazakhstan since 18th century (Risbergen, 2017) while post-independence witnessed huge renaming of ex-republics, the latter was tied with attempts to re-establish national identity and claim cultural autonomy (Vendina and Karpenko, 2023).

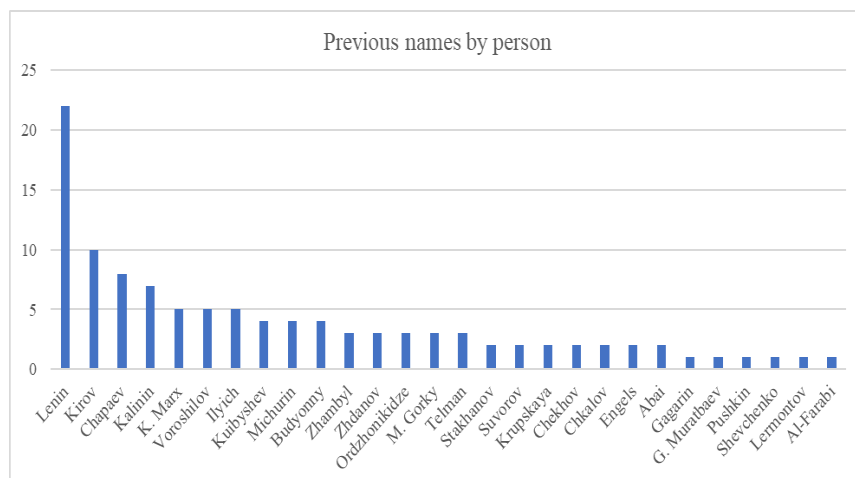
Place names are also layered with history. According to Clark (2017) the map of names is like a palimpsest. Various periods' names are on top of each other, representing successive waves of cultural and political dominance. There are remnants of many cultures in Kazakhstan even if Russian names continue to be prevalent according to Bekzatkyzy (2020). Along with the constant evolution of society, there is also an evolution in designating its components it is impossible to avoid changing names when values and worldview change. Altering perception towards conventional signs (Kharitonova, 2025) means rethinking and redefining names themselves. It was observed recently that research on place-names now extends from descriptive work to critical investigation of their political, cultural and economic backgrounds (Giraut & Houssay-Holzschuch, 2016). Name changes have economic and ideological implications. They are part of branding processes. They also mirror general patterns of urbanization, globalization and cultural change (Liu et al., 2024).

Empirical Findings

Change in the Kazakhstani toponymic space occurred on several levels at once. It ranged from ideology and proper names, through language, time and place. Even separately considered these 824 village cases show a massive restructuring of symbol space.

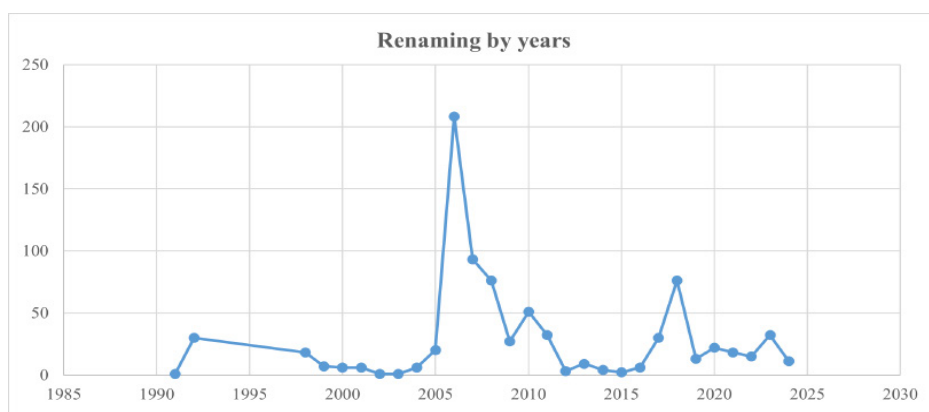
A large share of the old settlement names honoured particular people, almost all of them figures of the Soviet era. In our data 109 settlements carried a personal name. Lenin was the most common, appearing in 22 settlements, followed by Kirov in 10, Chapaev in 8, Kalinin in 7, and Marx and Voroshilov in 5 each. The same short list keeps returning further down. Ilyich, Kuibyshev and Michurin each name several settlements, and rarer cases include Zhdanov, Ordzhonikidze, Gorky and Thälmann. What stands out is how little this list varied from one region to another, or from one decade to the next. Soviet practice worked with a small, centrally approved set of names. Naming places after people was therefore common in scale but narrow in range.

Figure 1. The most frequent personal names among former settlement names, 1991–2024



Another large category consists of names with a purely ideological meaning. There are 149 such cases, which is 18,1 % of the 824 rural renamings. They all contain one or another symbol and slogan of the soviet regime – Red (55 examples), Komsomol (9), Communist (6), Comintern (5) Bolshevik (5), Virgin land (10), First of May (12) as well as a whole set connected with anniversaries and meetings of the Communist party (more than 10 in total). All these names have been renamed, showing that the ideological basis for Soviet toponymy has been entirely supplanted rather than merely amended.

Figure 2. Renamings of rural settlements by year, 1991–2024



Personal and ideological names together account for 258 cases, or 31,3 % of all rural renamings, which shows how extensively the Soviet layer was erased. The other names are usually Russian but neutral or geographic - Zarechny (by the river),

Ozyorny (lake), Severnoye (north). But again many get changed too, mainly by changing language.

The nomenclature changed. Only 85 settlements are named after particular persons. The number of toponyms based on people's names dropped considerably. Most of them commemorate famous Kazakh historical personages, especially batyrs (15 cases), as well as famous figures of culture, sciences and political leaders -

S. Kaldayakov, Zh. Aimauytov, K. Satbayev, T. Zhurgenov, M. Gabdullin, D. Kunaev, Y. Altynsarin etc. Most of the new names are neutral and are named after places, nature features, history in the area and spirit of the land.

The renamings were not steady, there were spikes. The first was only one in 1991, then jumped up to 30 in 1992, but then decreased during the late 1990's and early 2000's. There was a big jump in 2006 with 208 renamings, most of them (156/208) were in South Kazakhstan so likely some concerted activity across the whole region. Further small peaks occurred in 2007 (93 cases), 2008 (76 cases), 2010 (51 cases), 2018 (76 cases) and 2023 (32 cases). From 2020 to 2024 there was an average number of names changing each year between 11 - 32. A decrease compared with previous years' activity.

Table 1. Renamings of rural settlements by region, 1991-2024

Region	Renamings	Settlements	Share (%)
South Kazakhstan/ Turkestan*	274 (257 + 17)	794	34.5
Akmola	115	594	19.4
Aktobe	73	866	8.4
West Kazakhstan	67	416	16.1
East Kazakhstan	65	351	18.5
Pavlodar	51	355	14.4
Zhambyl	31	353	8.8
Almaty	30	368	8.2
Atyrau	29	153	19.0
North Kazakhstan	24	635	3.8
Karaganda	22	342	6.4
Kostanay	17	492	3.5
Kyzylorda	11	225	4.9
Semipalatinsk**	5	-	-
Taldykorgan**	4	-	-
Mangistau	3	59	5.1
Zhetisu	3	352	0.9
Total	824	6208	13.3

* South Kazakhstan region was renamed Turkestan region in 2018. Cases recorded before and after that date are combined here.

** Semipalatinsk and Taldykorgan regions were abolished in the administrative reform of 1997. The figures cover only the period of their separate existence.

*** Zhetisu region was established in 2022. The figure covers 2022–2024 only.

**** The settlement figures are those recorded for each region at the time the cases were counted. Because Zhetisu region was formed in 2022 out of territory previously counted within Almaty region, some settlements appear in both rows, and the column therefore sums to more than the national total of 6208.

Explaining regional disparities

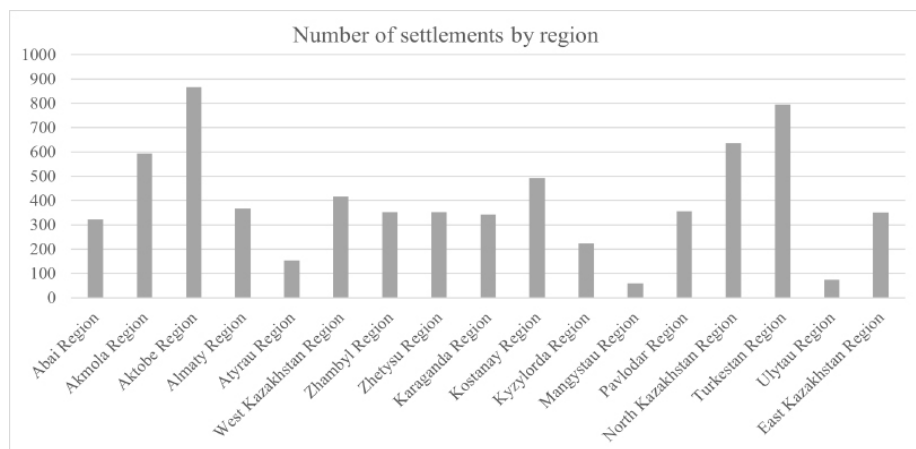
The gap between 257 renamings in South Kazakhstan and three in Mangistau or Zhetisu is too wide to be accidental, and no single cause explains it. Two factors set the outer limits. The first is the size of the settlement network. South Kazakhstan has 794 rural settlements, North Kazakhstan 635, Akmola 594 and Kostanay 492, while Mangistau has only 59. Three cases in Mangistau amount to 5,1% of its rural network and three in Zhetisu to 0,9%, so identical raw figures can mean very different things, and absolute counts must always be read against the shares given in Table 1. The second factor is how much Soviet naming there was to remove. Regions caught up in the Virgin Lands campaign and in earlier waves of resettlement, above all Akmola, North Kazakhstan, Kostanay and Pavlodar, acquired thick layers of new Russian language names in the 1950s and 1960s. Mangistau kept much of its older Kazakh toponymy, drawn from clan names and landscape features, with the oil settlements forming a small separate group. Where Soviet naming had never displaced the earlier layer there was little to restore, and the low figures show continuity rather than official inactivity.

The third factor is the ethnic and linguistic makeup of the countryside, which set the political cost of change. In the south, where the rural population is overwhelmingly Kazakh speaking, replacing a Soviet name with a Kazakh one met little resistance. In the north and north east, where large Russian and other Slavic rural communities live and where renaming close to the border carries an external resonance (Vendina and Karpenko, 2023, Rees et al., 2021), the authorities moved slowly and selectively, as the low shares for North Kazakhstan at 3,8% and Kostanay at 3,5% make clear. The fourth factor, and probably the decisive one, is the way the procedure itself is arranged. Throughout the period the binding decision to rename a rural settlement belonged to the oblast and was taken jointly by its maslikhat and akimat. District bodies and village akims could only put proposals forward. The initiative thus comes from below and the operative act from the region, which means that the pace in any given region depends on the priorities and working energy of its own authorities rather than on a quota set nationally. The expert stage above the oblast did shift over time, moving from a single government commission to regional commissions in 2013 and then to combined regional and republican approval in 2024, but the deciding level never moved. The peak of 2006 shows what follows from this. Of the 208 renamings recorded across the country that year, 156 were made in South Kazakhstan alone, which points to one oblast working through a full inventory of settlement names within a single administrative cycle rather than to unrelated local initiatives.

The fifth factor is administrative reform, which breaks the regional series into uneven segments. The reform of 1997 abolished the Semipalatinsk, Taldykorgan, Kokshetau and Turgai regions, South Kazakhstan became Turkestan in 2018, and in 2022 Abai, Zhetisu and Ulytau were created out of parts of East Kazakhstan, Almaty and Karaganda. Since each case is recorded under the unit in force at the time of the decision, the low counts for Zhetisu at three, Semipalatinsk at five and Taldykorgan at four reflect how briefly these units existed under those names rather than an absence of renaming on their territory. Taken together, the five factors show that the intensity of renaming depended on how many Soviet names a region had to work with, on how costly change was in ethnic and political terms, and above all

on the activity of the oblast authorities. Regional disparity is therefore not evidence of an inconsistent national policy but the predictable result of a policy whose implementation was left to the regions.

Figure 3. Renaming of settlements by regions



Data Analysis

Changes in place names affect many spheres of life - ideological, linguistic, geographical, temporal and cultural. In all 1188 names were changed. 824 changes took place in villages, which testifies to the systematic nature of these events (not single cases). It concerns a large number of settlements in the Kazakhstan. Rural place names are especially important because they represent the centre of symbolic transformation, which is shaped by national policy but also reinterpreted locally. The first feature of the process is that the Soviet ideological layer was erased rather than adjusted. Not one of the 149 names carrying open political symbolism survived in any form. This matters for how the change should be read. A regime that treated the previous nomenclature as material for reinterpretation would have kept some of it, adapted spellings or preserved individual names as local landmarks. Nothing of the kind happened, which indicates that the new symbolic order treated the Soviet register as incompatible with itself rather than as a heritage to be edited.

The second feature concerns naming after people. The scale of the practice under Soviet rule, reported above, shows that it was a routine instrument of marking territory rather than a rare honour, and that the settlements involved were drawn into a single nationwide set of commemorated figures. This change in nomenclature marks a break from the preceding pattern. Only 85 settlements received names based on people – that is not simply substituting Soviet-era personalities for national heroes but reflects an overall reduction of personal names. A general trend to abandon names linked to persons.

The new personal names point in a different direction, towards figures of Kazakh history and culture, with batyrs the largest single group. What matters here is not the list itself but its size, since naming after a person has become one option among several rather than the standard solution.

This pattern is quite regular. Place names of Kazakhstan tend to be neutral, based on geographic environment and written in Kazakh language. They usually refer to

natural landscape (mountain, river, forest) or specific geographical characteristics and culture of the region. It indicates «naturalizing» nomenclature - the place name starts being associated with nature and culture instead of something artificial or symbolic. Basically it means moving away from commemorating people towards just characterizing places.

Significant names are preserved, but with difficulty: Yntymak (10 cases), Beibitshilik (2), Azat (2), Azattyk (1) and Kazakhstan (1). Their small proportion indicates less interest in abstract ideological or normative names than in the Soviet years, when such terms occupied a central place.

Language is an important part of that change. Before there were many names for places which came from Russian and often they had very plain, even boring, descriptions – Zarechny (by the river), Ozyorny (lake) Severnoye (North) Voskresenovka (Resurrection Village) Bereзовка (birch grove). Their replacement by Kazakh names shows deliberate linguistic policy to make more use of native tongue in daily life. This is more than just language change it is a symbolic transformation of culture and communication in the eyes of people living there. Language plays an important role to embed history and culture into space.

The chronology described above also carries an interpretive point. The main wave is over. Since 2020 the annual figures have settled into a narrow band, which means the process has moved from wholesale replacement to selective correction of names that were left untouched earlier.

The number of cases varies a great deal from one region to another. South Kazakhstan/ Turkestan accounts for 274 renamings, Akmola for 115, Aktobe for 73, West Kazakhstan for 67, East Kazakhstan for 65 and Pavlodar for 51, while Zhetisu and Mangistau record three each, Taldykorgan four and Semipalatinsk five. As shown above, this spread does not mean that national policy was inconsistent. It reflects a policy carried out by the regions themselves, where the size of the settlement network, the amount of Soviet naming left to replace, the ethnic makeup of the rural population and the working energy of the oblast authorities together set the pace of change.

When the figures are set against the total number of rural settlements (6208), the picture changes noticeably. Aktobe, Turkestan and North Kazakhstan have the largest rural networks in the country, with 866, 794 and 635 settlements, yet their shares differ sharply, from 34,5% in Turkestan to 8,4% in Aktobe and 3,8% in North Kazakhstan. The most thoroughly reworked toponymic landscapes are therefore those of Turkestan at 34,5%, Akmola at 19,4%, Atyrau at 19,0%, East Kazakhstan at 18,5% and West Kazakhstan at 16,1%. Change was slow or highly selective in Zhetisu at 0,9%, Kostanay at 3,5% and North Kazakhstan at 3,8%. Across the country as a whole, 13,3% of rural settlements changed their names during the period under review. Raw counts and shares thus produce different rankings, and the two measures should be read together.

The results show a transition from ideologically motivated names to nationalistic ones. These new designations focus on geographic context rather than ideology. It fits into the general post-soviet trend of reconfiguring symbols, building nationhood, and increasing importance for regional culture and geography.

Discussion

Changing the names of Kazakhstani villages is not just an expression of national identity, it also affects people's memory and development of village. Place names - part of everyday life – include history in them, create sense of space.

The complete removal of Soviet names is more than just deleting a historical record. It changes the way people perceive and understand history. The act of removing names full of ideology, full of Soviet connotations, is changing the symbolics of daily life. But this does not imply that there would be no remnants left of the Soviet memory system at all. Some parts of it could survive in an informal manner, especially by older generations preserving their memories and practices from then on. What results are multiple layers of memory - past and present merging together.

Replacing Soviet names with hero's names places locals in the context of a greater nation. The general movement towards less personalized name selection indicates a shift from invented symbolic identities to ones that more accurately represent the areas and their history. This trend is further highlighted by increasing use of geographical and generic names, associating a name with tangible or intangible features of a region.

Depersonalizing names of places may serve to build up local identity. The fact that names are tied to the features of the landscape. The spirit of the place and culture helps people identify themselves as part of that particular area. Names from geography seem much closer to daily living and local knowledge than do ideological ones, which perhaps explains why they survive so well.

This is what makes it important. Replacement of Russian place names with Kazakh ones does not mean only replacement on official level – it means change in culture as well. Language transmits and preserves collective memory. The more often we use the Kazakh names, the stronger our traditions will be, nation identity will be strengthened, and social-cultural relationships among people will change for better.

Such heterogeneous spatial dynamics underline different effects. In case of regions with high number of renamed places (e. g., Turkestan, Akmola), the transformation is fast and broad - it means quick change in symbolism which may speed up re-construction of local identity; while for areas where there are few place names changed its identity remains polyphonic (polyvalent). Therefore the effect of renaming on collective memory and regional identity is very diverse by region.

The Kazakhstani case gains in interest when placed alongside work done elsewhere. Studies of place naming have long shown that commemorative names are a tool of political legitimation, through which the state writes a preferred version of the past into daily life (Azaryahu, 1996, Berg and Vuolteenaho, 2009). The pattern found here, in which a whole ideological nomenclature is removed and a national one put in its place, has been described in Moscow after 1991 (Gill, 2005), in Bucharest (Light, 2004), in Budapest (Palonen, 2008), in Leningrad and St Petersburg (Marin, 2012) and, more recently, in Ukrainian decommunisation (Zymovets, 2025). Outside the post socialist world, similar processes have been traced in the making of the Hebrew map of Israel (Azaryahu and Golan, 2001), in South Africa after apartheid (Guyot and Seethal, 2007) and in Singapore (Yeoh, 1996). The Kazakhstani material supports the general finding that a change of regime is followed by a clearing of the toponymic record, but it also adds two points.

The first concerns what is being studied. Almost all of this literature is urban and deals with streets and squares, where a name is one entry in a long commemorative text. A rural settlement is different, because its name is the whole of its official designation. Changing it does not adjust the local memory landscape, it replaces it, which makes the village a sharper measure of how deep a nation building programme reaches than the capital city. The second concerns direction. Most documented cases

swap one set of honoured figures for another, Soviet leaders for national heroes or colonial officials for liberation leaders. The Kazakhstani rural data instead show a move away from naming places after people at all, from 109 personal names to 85, and towards names taken from landscape and local culture. In the terms used by Nora (1989) and Assmann (1995), what is being rebuilt is less a list of figures to remember than the everyday cultural setting in which memory is kept.

This renaming happens at different levels all together. The renaming is organized by governments but its effects are visible in everyday life in community and society level. Renaming becomes an instrument of symbolizing change and also reflects changes over time in local communities.

Conclusion

This article has examined the renaming of rural settlements in Kazakhstan between 1991 and 2024, using the full corpus of 1188 official decisions, of which 824 concern rural settlements. What the record shows is not a series of routine administrative acts but a sustained rebuilding of the country's symbolic geography over three decades, carried out through legal instruments yet aimed at the cultural and linguistic foundations of local life.

Four findings stand out. The ideological layer of Soviet naming was removed rather than adjusted, since all 149 names with open political content, among them variants of Krasny at 55, Pervomaisky at 12, Tselinny at 10 and Komsomol at 9, were withdrawn without a single exception. Naming places after people also declined, from 109 cases to 85, and the figures still honoured shifted from Soviet leaders to Kazakh batyrs, scholars and writers, which is a reduction in the practice itself and not merely a change of names. The category that now dominates is descriptive, drawn from landscape, local history and cultural tradition and rendered in Kazakh, so that the language in which space is publicly described has changed as well. Finally, the process moved in waves, peaking in 2006, and its regional spread runs from 34,5% of the settlement network in Turkestan to under 4% in North Kazakhstan and Kostanay.

Explaining that unevenness is one contribution of the study. Regional variation follows from the size of each settlement network, the amount of Soviet naming available to replace, the ethnic makeup of the rural population and the political cost this carried, the way decision making authority was distributed between administrative levels, and repeated administrative reform. The fourth factor deserves emphasis. Throughout the period the binding decision rested with the oblast maslikhat and akimat, while district bodies could only put proposals forward, and the expert stage above the oblast moved from one republican commission to regional commissions in 2013 and back towards joint approval in 2024. Because the operative act was always regional, the working agent of memory politics is the intermediate tier rather than the national centre, as the concentration of 156 of the 208 cases of 2006 in a single region makes clear.

Set against the international literature, these findings confirm that place names serve as instruments of legitimation through which political authority writes a version of the past into daily practice (Azaryahu, 1996). They also extend the field. A complete national corpus of legal acts supports statements about waves, thresholds and regional variance that single city studies cannot, and moving the analysis from the urban street to the rural settlement brings into view a shift away from personal commemoration altogether. Compared with Moscow (Gill, 2005), Bucharest (Light, 2004), Budapest (Palonen, 2008), South Africa (Guyot and Seethal, 2007)

and Israel (Azaryahu and Golan, 2001), the Kazakhstani case suggests that post imperial renaming need not take the form of exchanging one set of honoured figures for another, and that a turn towards landscape based naming is a distinct and little studied variant of memory politics.

For local memory the implications cut both ways. Restoring Kazakh landscape and clan toponymy recovers knowledge that Soviet naming had covered over and returns to communities a resource taken from them. Yet removing an entire layer of names creates a break of its own, since for residents whose lives are bound up with the old names, and for the map and archive record, the erased toponym is itself a piece of local memory. The likely result, in line with the palimpsest model (Clark, 2017), is not replacement but layering, with an official name and an informal spoken one existing side by side and the second fading across generations. Recording the withdrawn names in local museums, regional archives and digital gazetteers would therefore be a sensible companion to renaming policy.

The limits of the study follow from its sources. Official acts record decisions, not how they were received, so this article describes the institutional reshaping of memory space and does not measure what rural residents think or say. Whether new names are taken up in speech, whether old ones survive informally, and how differently generations and ethnic groups within one village respond all remain open. These questions set the agenda for further work: fieldwork and oral history in villages with contrasting renaming histories, survey research on how renaming was received, comparison with rural rather than urban patterns in other post Soviet states, and study of the practical costs of renaming, from paperwork and maps to place branding and local development (Light and Young, 2015).

Funding: *This article was prepared within the framework of the financing of the project IPH AP26104221 «The influence of local collective memory on the development of local communities» and the affiliation of the organization: RSE at the PVC «Scientific Institute for the Study of Ulus Jochi» of the Science Committee of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan.*

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