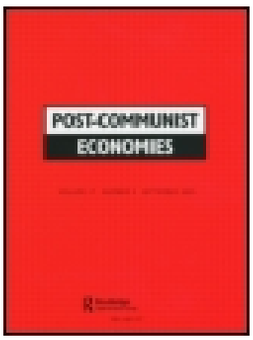

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Kazakhstan's climate change policy: reflecting national strength, green economy aspirations and international agenda

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ABSTRACT

This article looks at how Kazakhstan's heavy dependence on fossil fuels and its political context shape national discourse on climate change. Based on extensive analysis of the country's strategic documents and expert interviews, we argue that although Kazakhstan's economy relies on fossil fuels, the government is keen to promote sustainable development to attract international investments and advance its image as a 'strong state' for the domestic audience, and as a progressive and reliable partner for the international audience. Whilst there is little evidence of 'post-colonial' rhetoric appearing in Kazakhstan's official climate change discourse, the state's past is evident in its instrumental approach to environmental issues which in turn translates into inconsistencies in its climate change policy.

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Central Asia; Kazakhstan; climate change; climate policy; sustainable development

Introduction

Kazakhstan positions itself as a regional leader in terms of implementing climate change mitigation measures while also being the largest recipient of global multilateral climate funds in Central Asia (CA) (OECD, 2016). The state made commitments under the Paris Agreement, and in 2013 declared its intention to transform to a green economy by 2050. However, the feasibility of these national strategies is doubtful. The Kazakh economy relies heavily on fossil fuels, which accounted for 21% of its GDP in 2020, and around 70% of the country's exports (World Bank, n.d.). Kazakhstan is the 9th largest crude oil and 14th largest natural gas exporter in the world, and it ranks in the top 14 states in terms of natural gas reserves (CIA.gov, 2021). Natural gas production increased twofold from 2013–2016, and oil production reached its peak in 2019 with policymakers planning to double output by 2025 (IEA, 2020). Kazakhstan lags behind other fossil fuel exporters in terms of energy efficiency and diversity[1] (IRENA, n.d.) as its energy mix is dominated by coal which makes up 47% of the country's total primary energy supply (TPES) followed by oil and gas which account for around 25% each (IEA, 2020). Whilst Kazakhstan has managed to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions' by 3–5% by 2020[2] (from 1990 levels), an increase of 6–9% is likely by 2030[3] if the state pursues a 'business as usual' approach (IEA, 2020). Thus, current state

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policies are insufficient to help meet the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) goal to keep warming below 1.5–2 C (Climate Analytics, 2019).

Over the last decade, we have seen an increase in studies on climate change politics in developing countries with semi-authoritarian/authoritarian forms of governance (e.g. Kopra, 2018; Korppoo, 2016; Poberezhskaya, 2016; Schreurs, 2011); however, CA in general and Kazakhstan in particular, remain largely ignored (Poberezhskaya & Danilova, 2021). This article contributes to the existing literature gap in the following ways. Firstly, it offers a comprehensive analysis of the decision-making process on climate change-related issues in Kazakhstan and how it fits with national and international policy agendas. Secondly, it analyses how the fossil fuel economy coexists with climate change politics and how their mutually exclusive goals are presented within official rhetoric. Thirdly, it looks at the reasons for policymakers to advance a 'green economy' discourse in resource dependent developing countries with authoritarian forms of governance. Lastly, the article contributes to the theoretical debate by exploring whether the country's post-colonial self-image plays a role in national climate change rhetoric. By the application of discourse analysis we argue that although Kazakhstan's economy is based on fossil fuels, the government promotes the idea of green development to attract international investments as well as to advance its image as a 'strong state' (for the domestic audience), and as a progressive and reliable partner (for international audiences).

To achieve these aims, we first look at Kazakhstan's vulnerabilities to climate change. We then offer theoretical and methodological considerations, followed by the analysis which is set in three sections looking at the domestic, international and green economy discourses. We conclude with a comprehensive discussion of the main narratives identified in Kazakhstan's climate policy.

Climate change in Kazakhstan: geography, threats and vulnerabilities

Kazakhstan is the 9th largest country in the world by territory, but its population is relatively small at around 18 million and is unevenly distributed throughout the country (mostly located in the south). The majority of the country is covered by desert, semi-desert, and steppes. It is these geographic characteristics that shed light on the country's climate change vulnerabilities. For instance, as in the rest of CA, climate change is negatively affecting Kazakhstan's already fragile water security situation (World Bank, 2014), this includes rapidly melting glaciers (the main source of drinking water) and a change in the 'peak flow of key rivers' impacting the growing season as well as further contributing to rapid land degradation and desertification, a reduction in agricultural yields, and transboundary conflicts in the region (Bernauer & Siegfried, 2012; Xenarios et al., 2019). As climate change worsens, according to the Asian Development Bank, by 2050 it will lead to additional yearly expenditures of US$550 million to mitigate freshwater deficiency in CA (CAN, 2014).

The negative effects of climate change are spread unevenly throughout Kazakhstan with more precipitation in the north and increasingly less precipitation in the south which can cause substantial damage to both the population's health and to local agriculture. Like many other places, Kazakhstan is likely to suffer from changes in the 'transmission of infectious diseases, increased mortality and morbidity from extreme weather events and reduced availability of clean water' (WHO, 2009). Indeed, Kazakhstan is already suffering from the

increased frequency and intensity of floods, mudflows, heatwaves (e.g. heatwaves in 2010 and 2014), forest and steppe fires, and sudden changes in temperature. Extreme weather events (associated with climate change) have been seen to destroy people's houses, and damage existing utility infrastructure (interview 5). These problems also jeopardise Kazakhstan's agricultural industry (it is one of the world's largest wheat producers), and it has already noticed 'reduced crop yields from drought and fires' (WHO, 2009). For instance, in 2012 and 2014 the country's crops were severely damaged or destroyed (15% and 8% respectively). It is estimated that if farming practices remain the same, the decrease in annual harvests may reach 49% due to climate change (Ministry of Energy of the RK, 2017). Arguably, climate change also contributes to man-made disasters, for instance, a collapse of the dam wall of Sardoba reservoir which, whilst located in Uzbekistan, affected neighbouring Kazakhstan by destroying properties and causing US$10 million in damage in the agricultural sector (Simonov, 2020). All these problems can potentially threaten the social stability of the country as 'one sixth of the work force in Kazakhstan works in the agriculture, forestry and fishery sectors' (Ministry of Energy of the RK, 2017). Kazakhstan's vulnerability also comes from its over reliance on the extraction of natural resources which (as discussed at length below) serves as a foundation for the country's economic growth.

Due to CA's socio-economic and political problems, scholars point to its potentially low levels of adaptation abilities (Deng & Chen, 2017; Fay et al., 2010). This includes limited climate change awareness and a great disparity in available resources for economic development (World Bank, 2015). Existing problems with the transparency and openness of local governments, a lack of freedom of speech and restricted 'citizen dialogue' further hinder regional climate change adaptation (Stan Radar, 2016). Both climate change mitigation and adaptation struggles could also be explained by consistent prioritisation of seemingly more important issues (e.g. economic and political stability). Additionally, climate change policies in Kazakhstan must survive constant institutional change. For example, Kazakhstan numerously modified its environmental governance structure, the first institutional formation being a Ministry of Ecology and Bioresources which was established in 1992, and its most recent reincarnation being the Ministry of Ecology, Geology and Natural Resources which was officially formed in 2019 (in between there were four other Ministries that governed similar areas under different names). The latter now hosts the Department of Climate Policy and Green Technology (www.gov.kz). At the regional level, climate action is restrained by the lack of cooperation between neighbouring states, which rather see the issue as a reason for conflicts rather than an opportunity for cooperation (International Crisis Group, 2011). For instance, a struggle over freshwater and energy resources has already become a source of regional tension.

In sum, Kazakhstan's vulnerability comes from its specific geographical characteristics, and its unique economic, social and political situation where semi-authoritarian rule co-exists with a carbon-intensive economy. We argue that Kazakhstan's political history as well as its current foreign policy significantly contribute to the state's identity and subsequently, shape its climate change-related policies and processes.

Theory

Viewing the Soviet Union (SU) as an empire and its former members as postcolonial states, can be useful in understanding Kazakhstan's national identity and its environmental

rhetoric. Heathershaw (2010) argues that 'the post-coloniality of Central Asian states is an integral dimension of their continuance today' (p. 10), and postcolonial theory is a key to understanding state discourses and their effects. Dubuisson (2020, p. 9) notices that in Kazakhstan, the discourses of the former Soviet space still shape both environmental decision-making and public responses to the issues of land protection, conservation and natural resources.

Postcolonial theory is concerned with the 'forces of oppression and coercive domination that operate in the contemporary world' (Young, 2001, p. 11) where current discourses of colonised countries are shaped by their historical past. Heathershaw (2010, p. 8) identifies three conceptual tools of postcolonial theory: hybridity, subalternity, orientalism. Hybridity – or inbetweenness – refers to transcultural forms of politics where new nationalist goals are underpinned by colonial thinking. Soviet states were constructed as colonial entities by the nation-builder (Smith et al., 1998); hence, postcolonial self-image underpins the political discourse of the post-Soviet landscape. In the case of Kazakhstan, it is still legitimising presidential rhetoric (Kudaibergenova, 2016a, p. 920). 'Subalternity' means control imposed by the ruling elites. The Soviet leaders distributed control through the local communist elites, and this allowed certain Kazakh officials to retain their status after the regime's collapse (Dave, 2007, p. 95). Shakhanova (2017) argues that the influence of Russia as Kazakhstan's 'historical other' still influences in some way national decision-making processes. Lastly, 'orientalism' signifies the production of knowledge through power – construction of national identity and culture through the discourse of the coloniser (Said, 1978). Soviet power produced knowledge both about and for the CA states – it created them as subjects to empire, and arguably it continues to affect current generations (Adams, 2008; Heathershaw, 2010).

Beissinger and Young (2002, p. 24) highlight an important role of postcolonial image in independent Kazakhstan characterising its political discourse by the 'silent incorporation of its colonial origins'. However, the 'struggle over identity' is a key feature in Kazakhstan's national discourse as the state faces the challenge of the reinvention of itself both nationally and internationally (Dave, 2007; Fierman, 2009). The presence of postcolonial rhetoric can also be seen in omissions. For instance, by not creating a robust state ideology, the elites adopted the language of former oppressor to re-legitimatise authority in the post-Soviet era (Kudaibergenova, 2016a). As a result, modern Kazakh postcolonialism comes as 'a purely political and nationalising discourse' (ibid, p. 921) that constructs and maintains the state's identity.

The issue of identity is also prominent in 'green' postcolonial scholarship as it focuses on the issues of power dynamics, the colonisation of nature and displacement of environmental practices (Grove & Grove, 1996; Plumwood, 2006). This is particularly relevant to the context of the former SU with its anthropocentric policies exported from Moscow to the republics (Sharipova, 2019). Likewise, postcolonial rhetoric penetrates the discourse of climate change, which is shaped by social problems, power relations, economic interests and the (inter-)national image of the state (Dubuisson, 2020). As Huggan (2004, p. 702) notes, the rise of 'green' postcolonial studies was in effect to understand that colonialism and imperialism cannot be explained without 'engaging with the massive scale of environmental devastation that they entail'. Providing the ground for 'struggles over resources, legitimacy, and meaning' (Kandiyoti, 2002, p. 295), the postcolonial context applied to climate change politics enforces a critical view of the discourses encountered

with the use of natural resources, mitigation practices and the negative effects of climate change.

To date, Kazakhstan, as well as the whole CA region, has been largely overlooked in postcolonial studies (Moore, 2001) and there are two main reasons for this. First, the SU was never recognised as a traditional colonial power (Edgar, 2006, p. 255) because of its 'modernisation' projects and nativization policy ('korenizatsia'), and the combination of imperial and state modernising practices (Adams, 2008). Chernetsky et al. (2006) describe the Soviet power as 'expressly internationalist yet zealously territorial and expansionist' (p. 832) – such an image makes one see Kazakhstan primarily in post-socialist and post-Soviet rather than in postcolonial terms. Second, there is a lack of postcolonial thought inside the region as most local scholars avoid rhetoric associated with oppression and third world countries (Abashin, 2014). But as 'the arrival of post-colonialism in Central Asian studies is long over-due' (Heathershaw, 2010, p. 1), recently one can observe a growing body of this type of research (e.g. Beissinger & Young, 2002; Edgar, 2006; Kandiyoti, 2002; Khalid, 2006) as well as specific application of post-colonialism to environmental issues in the region (Adams, 2008; Dubuisson, 2020; Kudaibergenova, 2016b; Sharipova, 2019). Inspired by this theoretical discussion, we look at how Kazakh political elites construct the image of the country within climate change discourse and whether the country's postcolonial past is affecting its current responses to climate change.

Methodological considerations

Van Dijk (2001, p. 357) argues that control over public discourse is 'a first major form of power', thus discourse analysis can be seen as a key tool in understanding policymaking process (Leipold et al., 2019), including the one revolving around climate change-related issues (Bäckstrand & Lövbrand, 2019; Wilson Rowe, 2013). Therefore, for this qualitative study, we employ discourse analysis of Kazakhstan's official documents and expert interviews. Specifically, we applied political discourse analysis (PDA) which looks at how political actors construct beliefs and actions of broader society through language. The collected data were analysed by the means of the toolkit adopted from Van Dijk (2013, pp. 175–196) which allowed us to explore six analytical categories: membership, typical activities, aims, norms, position, and resources involved. Membership criteria points to the speaker's self-identity and attachment to a certain social group; typical activities criteria describe the actor's common action; aims point to what the actor wants and how this is reasoned; norms define what is good or bad in the actor's opinion; position indicates relationships with others; resources show what the actor has or does not have (*ibid*). The texts were coded with the software NVIVO-12. Further interpretations were done manually as computer-based analytics may limit and confuse the findings (Charmaz, 2000, p. 520).

We analysed five official documents (see Table 1 for the list) which serve as a foundation for Kazakhstan's climate policy (as claimed in the 7th national communication of the Republic of Kazakhstan (RK) to the UNFCCC (Ministry of Energy of the RK, 2017, pp. 75–77)). The importance of these documents was also highlighted through interviews: 'in Kazakhstan we have a hierarchical state management with a unified system of state planning' with 'Strategy-2050' being the most important one whilst everything else complies with it (interview 6). Thus, even if climate change is not featured in these

Table 1. Analysed documents.

Document	Released date	Description	Relation to climate change
Strategy Kazakhstan 2050: A New Political Course of the Established State	14 December 2012	Provides a long-term vision for strategic development of the state	Transition to a low carbon economy; Natural resource management
Concept for Transition of the RK to a Green Economy	30 May 2013	Sets the ground for systemic transformations to a green economy	Transition to a low carbon economy;
Strategic Plan for Development of the RK until 2020	1 February 2010	Sets a strategic plan fornational development for a 10-year period	Transition to a low carbon economy;
Concept of Innovative Development of the RK until 2020	4 June 2013	Sets a strategic plan for transition to innovative economy	Developing RES and energy-saving technologies
Plan of the Nation – 100 Concrete Steps	6 May 2015	Sets a response to global socio-economic challenges and a strategy for economic growth	Developing energy-saving technologies and attracting foreign investors

documents, climate-related policies must correlate with the state's outlined goals, visions and plans.

Moreover, we interviewed Kazakhstan's policymakers and experts who contributed to domestic climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies, environmental legislation, the national Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS), communications to the UNFCCC and so forth. We also consulted national and international NGOs' members and scientists who directly affect policy-making decisions. The participants were asked open-ended questions guided by a topic list, which was adjusted depending on the participant's area of expertise. While most of the interviews were held as conversations of 40–60 minutes in length, two experts shared their thoughts in writing. We interviewed 13 experts in the period of February–March 2021.

Analysis

The analysis of the collected data showed that overall climate change is underrepresented within the state's official discourse. Even when the discussed policies directly affect GHG emissions in the country, there are often no explicit connections with climate change (e.g. the 'Green Economy Concept'). It is only in the 'Strategy to 2020' that climate change is discussed in alarming terms to ensure the advancement of rational resource use. The lukewarm attitude towards the problem among state officials was also voiced by interviewees who indicated that even the policy of decarbonisation or development of renewable energy sources (RES) often do not have climate change links, negatively impacting awareness of the problem (e.g. interview 6). The analysis showed that climate change policy is affected by three discursive categories: national strength, development of a green economy and international cooperation (see Table 2). It is within those discursive dimensions that we present our findings.

Climate change and national strength

Kazakhstan has been engaged with the global climate change policy framework since 1995 (Ministry of Energy of the RK, 2017); however, it has been slow with regard to national

Table 2. Discursive categories with examples.

	Identity	Activity	Aims	Norms	Relationship	Resources
National strength	Strong state	Progress made after the end of the Soviet era	TOP-30 global economy, national security	Strong and stable economy, social welfare	Emphasis on national unity	Natural resources
Green Economy	Sustainable economy	Developing RES and energy-saving technologies	Continuing economic growth & looking after the environment	Green economy, a 'win-win' approach	Regional leader & reliable international partner	Energy efficiency potential
International cooperation	Key global player	International cooperation	Foreign investments, global & regional recognition	Global standards, international cooperation, global influence	Multi-vector policy	Geolocation; natural resources

commitments. For instance, the Kyoto Protocol was ratified only in 2009. Just throughout the last decade related policies started to be included in the key national documents, for instance, transition of all mining companies to environmentally friendly production ('Strategy-2050'), privatising agricultural lands to encourage their efficient use, and replacing outdated construction standards with the 'eurocodes' ('100 Concrete Steps'). In 2010, Kazakhstan adopted a law 'on Amendments to Certain Legislative Acts of the Republic of Kazakhstan Relating to Environmental Issues' which allowed the country to start trading emissions and to encourage Joint Implementation (JI) projects. This led to the establishment of the Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS) in Kazakhstan, the only project of its kind in the Post-Soviet space. The pilot stage launched in 2013 and included 178 companies representing extractive industries (responsible for 55% of the state's GHG emissions) with the requirement to keep emissions levels at the base line year of 2010 (Ministry of Energy of the RK, 2017). Subsequent phases had more ambitious targets and included a wider range of participants positively contributing to the switch towards a greener economy. It should be noted that the first two rounds of the ETS were not successful in encouraging participants to cut GHG emissions (because of loose rules on access to quotas) whilst after the suspension of the scheme in 2016 adjustments were made to motivate industries to start lowering their emissions (interview 9). Despite some industrial lobbying against the ETS's existence (*ibid*), the scheme resumed in 2018. The ETS was meant to be an economic mechanism to regulate carbon emissions, but our analysis showed that it also became another proud moment in Kazakhstan's national politics (interview 4):

> When we were in full swing trading quotas, in Moscow there was still almost no talk about it [. . .] Moreover, I think that it is not only Russia, but Kazakhstan occupies a leading position among all CIS [Commonwealth of Independent States] countries.

Overall, national climate policy contributes to a persistent narrative of Kazakhstan being a 'strong state' which can deal with various risks, including climate change. In fact, climate change is not only a challenge, but an opportunity to switch towards sustainable

development to further improve the country's domestic stability and its international position. In the 'Strategy-2050', former President Nazarbayev proclaimed Kazakhstan's objective 'to be among the top 30 global economies by 2050' which developed into an extensive concept of national strength and prosperity (see also '100 Concrete Steps'). The idealistic portrayal of Kazakhstan's bright future includes all aspects of its development: economic modernisation, education, health, women's rights and so on. Moreover, 'Strategy-2050' presents an interesting example of how Nazarbayev identifies himself with Kazakhstan as the strategy looks a lot like a personal letter from a father figure rather than a state leader:

> I call on all people to arm themselves with eternal qualities - diligence, hard work and dedication, which will help us to resist and create a worthy future for our Motherland. I believe in you. I believe that we will not miss a new historic chance.

This personification of politics became evident also during our interviews. For instance, some experts noted that the whole idea of sustainable development and green economy could be attributed to Nazarbayev's personal desire to earn international recognition[4] (e.g. interview 1). Furthermore, several interviewees pointed to current President Tokayev's professional background (specifically, his former role as a Director-General at the UN's Geneva office) which allows him to understand international positions on major issues and how to attract positive attention and investments to address sustainable development and climate change problems in the country (interviews 3 & 4). This is particularly important as in Kazakhstan's climate policy the president is considered to be the main decision-maker (interview 4).

The presentation of Kazakhstan as a strong state is also solidified against the troublesome historical background with the emphasis on the challenging post-Soviet period (rather than the Soviet one). For example, despite 'the post-Soviet chaos' the state's leadership through the 'right' political strategy and 'hard work' has managed to improve Kazakhstan's politics and economy ('Strategy-2050'). Climate politics emerging in Kazakhstan during this post-Soviet period appear to be a response to global trends or even 'as a tribute of fashion because everyone talked about the climate, which means that we [Kazakhstan] also needed to talk about it' (interview 11).

However, there are obvious limitations with the national climate change policy that are evident through a lack of coherency with existing mitigation and adaptation efforts, limited coordination among involved stakeholders and the lack of a national strategy/programme specifically dedicated to climate change which would bring together a range of measures and actions (Ministry of Energy of the RK, 2017). This sentiment of institutional incoherency was echoed by our interviewees, as several of them highlighted that the complexity of climate change requires coordination between various state and private institutions which is currently limited. The problem translates into mutually exclusive policy decisions and steps, as one of the NGO representatives (interview 6) sharply noted 'it is impossible to increase livestock breeding and at the same time reduce [GHG] emissions.'

Kazakhstan's climate policy is further weakened by constant institutional change (as mentioned above) where the accumulation of knowledge on complex environmental problems 'thins out' as people go in and out of their ministerial positions or switch between various institutions (interviews 1 & 13). The problem is then complicated by

the limitations of climate science development in the country. Whilst important work has been done by the local scientific institutions (e.g. 'Kazhydromet', Scientific and Educational Centre 'Green Academy', Nazarbayev University and KazNU research groups) and they are able to advise the state's climate policy (along with the relevant NGOs), there is a 'lack of policy to build the capacity of young scientists and maintain a continuity [of climate knowledge]' (interview 8). Furthermore, despite Kazakhstan's commitment to develop national science ('Concept of ID to 2020'), there is a lack of skilled ecologists in Kazakhstan, and the average wage in academia remains quite low (interview 11).

To sum up, the discursive representation of national strength and pride where even climate change threats are seen as an opportunity rather than a constraint is weakened by the reality of Kazakhstan's climate policies that require a more consistent national effort.

Climate change and green economy

The most popular narrative in all analysed documents is the discussion of 'green economy' and 'sustainable development' which suggests that the government seeks to resolve existing environmental problems, including climate change, without economic loss and abandonment of its resource driven economy. Here, sustainable development includes energy efficiency, diversification of the economy, and contribution to social and economic stability with the creation of new employment opportunities (for example, by 2050, it is expected that more than 500,000 jobs will be created) ('Green Economy Concept'). Thus, it is seen as an opportunity 'to find money for decarbonisation' and to follow global trends where tightening international carbon regulations leads to the same processes inside the country (interview 3). For example, as more countries, including the USA, Canada and China, are about to introduce the carbon tax, it is reasonable for Kazakhstan to enforce domestic regulations on businesses rather than to face budget losses (interview 9). Changes in the international market already led to some positive developments in Kazakhstan's national climate policy – for example, the requirement to disclose annual GHG emissions (World Bank, 2018) which concerns organisations/businesses emitting more than 20,000 tons a year (interview 6).

The analysed texts also demonstrate a presence of 'resource nationalism', where Kazakhstan's fossil fuel reserves are presented as 'the powerhouse of our economy' ('Strategy-2050'). Interestingly, the discourse of sustainable development and economic modernisation does not clash with the notion of national pride in the extractive industry which is explained by the fact that GHG emissions from fossil fuel extraction are relatively low (interviews 10, 11 & 13) while the majority of extracted resources are exported. Hence, it is not the state's concern what happens with fossil fuels once they are exported: 'we drove it [oil] into the pipeline, and it went on, and what happens next is not important. We extract – we sell, that is it' (interview 10). On the other hand, it is stated that success in the oil and gas industries will help to build a new economy for the future as well as to strengthen Kazakhstan's role in international affairs dealing with global problems, including environmental ones. For example, the 'Strategy-2050' claims: 'we have been blessed with abundant natural resources and other countries will need to rely on us for their resource needs'. Poberezhskaya and Danilova (2021) argue that in Kazakhstan's official discourse even climate change is presented as another 'resource' that is utilised to bring

benefits to the state, for instance, to present itself as an active participant of the international community.

Interestingly, climate change also appears as an opportunity to embrace innovation: 'the threat of climate change and limited natural resources have led to a scientific and technological breakthrough' ('Concept of ID to 2020'). The majority of Kazakhstan's own GHG emissions comes from over reliance on coal and oil for the domestic market which is exacerbated by the infrastructure, technology, and standards inherited from the Soviet period: about 50% of energy-related infrastructure in the country is older than 30 years, some 50–60 years old (ADB, 2013). In the Environmental Performance Index (EPI), Kazakhstan's carbon intensity is behind even developing nations including fellow former Soviet republics like Russia, Belarus, Armenia and Turkmenistan (UNECE, 2019). Therefore, Kazakhstan has strong capacity to reduce GHG emissions through improvements in energy efficiency as well as switching to RES (Karatayev & Clarke, 2016).

Indeed, Kazakhstan has necessary natural, climatic, and economic conditions to develop sustainable energy solutions, being the only country in CA which has both significant solar and wind energy capacity (Samruk-Kazyna, 2018). Relatively speaking, the country has already achieved some positive results given the steady growth of RES productivity over the past decade (see Figure 1). Furthermore, the data on solar capacities has become publicly accessible (AtlasSolar, 2017), financing of renewable energy increased from US$1.33 million in 2010 to US$93 million in 2018 (IRENA, 2019), and the sector has attracted foreign financial and technical support (e.g. EUR 300 million from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD); and US$107.8 million from the Clean Technology Fund) (Ministry of Energy of the RK, 2017).

As a result Kazakhstan has achieved its goal of reaching 3% of RES in energy mix by 2020 as stated by the Minister of Energy (Sabekov, 2021). However, there is a widespread opinion that the 2030 target of 35% and the 2050 target of 50% will be missed (interviews 3, 6, 9 & 11). In fact, the renewable energy sector continues to suffer from various barriers including limited regulatory components and the lack of a feed-in tariff system (Koch & Tynkkynen, 2021). Without this, renewable energy producers could not realistically be

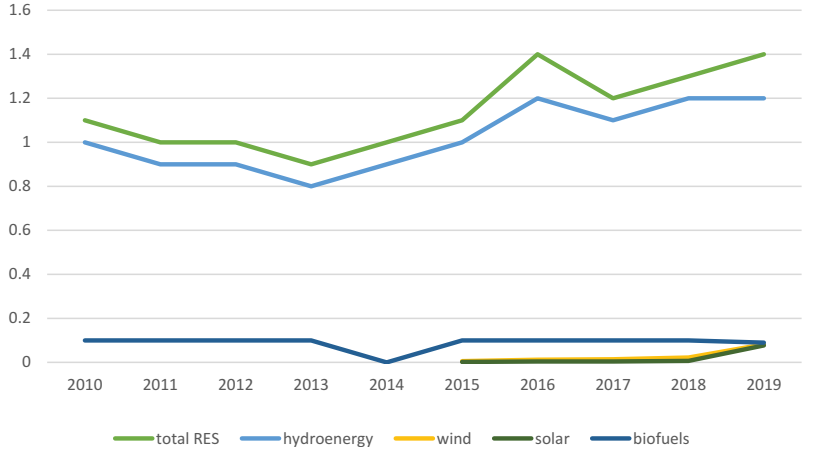

Figure 1. RES sector in Kazakhstan, 2010–2019. Source: Authors' own elaboration based on data from KazStat (2021).

expected to compete with traditional fuel supplies, which have long been (and continue to be) aided by artificially low electricity prices supported by state subsidies (Wheeler, 2017). Interestingly, along with the RES, nuclear energy is also seen as one of the ways to reduce GHG emissions and contribute to climate change mitigation (Ministry of Energy of the RK, 2017). However, due to the country's difficult past (e.g. nuclear pollution caused by the Semipalatinsk testing site) nuclear energy, as in many other parts of the world, is a contested topic (interview 9) (see also Howie et al., 2020).

The narrative of 'modernisation' and economic prosperity is persistent not only through all the documents that impact the state's climate change strategy but also in Nazarbayev's overall official rethoric (Kudaibergenova, 2015; Seydullayeva et al., 2015). Unsurprisingly, within the discourse of 'green economy', the 'economy' part takes clear priority over the 'green' one. Thus, the aim of sustainable development is to strengthen Kazakhstan's political and economic stance rather than deal with the climate crisis as the 'initiatives that not only improve the environmental situation but also result in increased economic benefits will be prioritised' ('Green Economy Concept').

Climate change and international cooperation

Our data demonstrate that Kazakhstan is presented as a 'responsible and reliable partner with significant influence in the international arena' ('Strategy–2050'). This image is supported by Kazakhstan's role as a contributor to global energy security; a cultural 'bridge' connecting the Islamic and Christian worlds, the East and the West; a guarantor of regional security in CA; and a global ambassador ('Strategy to 2020'). The global environmental crisis in this regard is seen as an opportunity to solidify this image. Furthermore, there is a clear discursive alignment with international actors and practices that serve as examples of successful sustainable development and economic diversification (e.g. 'Concept to ID'). For example, the international exposition 'Future Energy' (EXPO-2017) held in Kazakhstan became a symbol of national pride (e.g. 'Concept to ID'; 'Strategy–2050') contributing to all identified narratives: advancing the image of the strong state for Kazakhstan and of a powerful leader for President Nazarbayev (interview 1), as well as bringing attention to the green economy and Kazakhstan's international commitments (Poberezhskaya & Danilova, 2021). This desire to match expectations of the global community (mostly the EU and the OECD members) correlates with Kazakhstan's persistent interest in gaining Western approval since its independence in 1991 (Koch, 2018; Schatz, 2006) and perseverance of the 'multi-vector policy' which is described in the 'Strategy to 2020' as 'friendly relations of equal cooperation with all states'.

Against this backdrop, Kazakhstan's GHG emissions reduction goals present an interesting case. Whilst in 1990 emissions were relatively high, following the economic collapse caused by the dissolution of the SU and political and social instability throughout the 1990s (Bolesta, 2019), Kazakhstan unintentionally almost halved its emissions from the base-line year (see Figure 2). As the country stabilised economically from 2000 onwards, emissions have been steadily increasing, though they remained below the 1990 base level at least until 2018[5] (Figure 2). Therefore, Kazakhstan was able to make reduction commitments without economic sacrifice. Indeed, under the Paris Agreement, Kazakhstan aims to keep GHG emissions 15% below the 1990 level by 2030 (an unconditional target). However, unlike many countries, Kazakhstan also has a 'conditional target' of 25% GHG

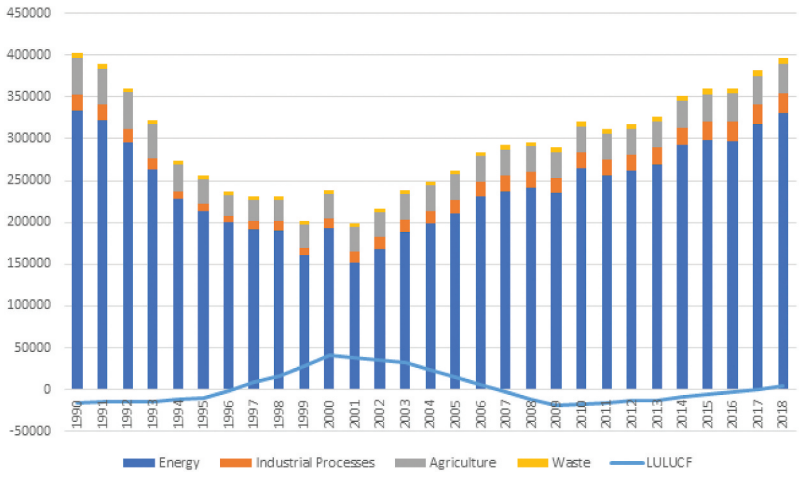

Figure 2. GHG emissions in Kazakhstan, 1990–2018. *GHG emissions, thousands of tons of CO2 equivalent. Source: Authors' own elaboration based on data from the Ministry of Ecology, Geology and Natural Resources of the RK (2020, pp. 37–38).

emissions reduction by 2030: the condition requires 'additional international investments, access to low carbon technology transfer mechanisms, green climate funds and flexible mechanisms for countries in economic transition' (Government of the RK, 2015). Experts argue that even despite the economic recession of the 1990s, if Kazakhstan continues a 'business as usual' approach without introducing robust punitive measures, it will not reach the GHG emissions reduction targets (interviews 3, 4 & 9) with some suggesting that emissions already exceed the base line (interview 11) (although there are no official data yet). There is still a possibility to achieve carbon neutrality by 2060 (as announced by the president in September 2020) by offsetting emissions via various projects, but that would require the state's commitment and substantial investments (interviews 9 & 13).

The paradox of relatively ambitious goals despite a lack of aspiration to give up its fossil fuel driven economy is explained by Kazakhstan's desire to impress international partners; Nazarbayev's personal drive to be seen as a modern leader committed to global sustainable development; limited understanding of how those commitments will be practically transferred into economic and industrial changes; and the above mentioned interest in foreign investments[6] (interview 4 & 3).

Indeed, Kazakhstan has been quite successful in attracting global attention to its climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts. In 2015, US$416.3 million were allocated to climate-related projects with 97% coming from 'loans' and 3% as 'grant assistance' (in addition to the EBRD, funding was also provided by the Global Environment Facility (US$9.66 million), USA (US$1.83 million), Japan (US$30,000) and South Korea (US $22,000)) (Ministry of Energy of the RK, 2017). Furthermore, that same year, the World Bank (2015) committed US$38 million 'from the International Development Association to finance the first phase of the Climate Adaptation and Mitigation Program for Aral Sea Basin (CAMP4ASB)'. Among other investors and lenders are the European Investment Bank (EIB), the Climate Investment Funds (CIF), European Union, World Health Organization (WHO), UNDP and USAID.

We argue that Kazakhstan's relations with foreign investors and Western partners is potentially the most evident manifestation of post-colonial rhetoric. Interestingly, whilst the blame is not allocated to the former 'colonial power' (the SU), it is occasionally attributed to the 'developed economies' and in particular Europe, for example:

> the economy of Kazakhstan during the years of independence has developed mainly due to the extractive sectors that were attractive to foreign investors. And since in Europe, they were already greening, they naturally invested mainly in dirty production [. . .] the extraction of raw materials and the production of energy-intensive products (interview 6).

Kazakhstan's international image is also supported through its pride in leading the way among developing countries. For instance, it committed to the Africa–Kazakhstan Partnership for the Sustainable Development Goals which aimed to assist 45 African states (budgeted at US$2 million). A similar agreement has been signed with the Caribbean Community, with Kazakhstan committing US$770,000 to help the region with their sustainability and climate change efforts. Kazakhstan has also initiated the inter-regional 'Green Bridge' partnership which is meant to stimulate a transition towards more sustainable economies (by 2019 the initiative included 15 countries and 12 NGOs) (Kozhanova, 2019). Kazakhstan's leadership is particularly stressed with regard to CA:

> Kazakhstan has a leading role [. . .] Others [CA countries] - yes, they have concerns, but they are concerned, that's all. They may discuss, but they do not really do anything. And we [in Kazakhstan] can see the direction, development (interview 4).

> Yes, so far Kazakhstan has been ahead of other states in the region [CA], mostly because it started first [working with climate change issues] (interview 3).

The international dimension of Kazakhstan's climate change policy presents a number of opportunities for the interested stakeholders who can benefit from the state's openness to financial investments but also its ambitions to be seen as an active global player. However, there is a danger of contributing to Kazakhstan's policy of 'greenwashing' (Koch & Tynkkynen, 2021). Whilst the narratives of sustainable development and commitment to the global fight against climate change strengthen the image of the progressive state, arguably, the green rhetoric is also used as a tool of political control, promoting certain types of environmental behaviour among stakeholders, local policymakers and citizens (Domjan & Stone, 2010) that does not question the state's reliance on fossil fuels.

Discussion

Our analysis demonstrates the limited presence of postcolonialism in Kazakhstan's political discourse of climate change. There is some evidence of the 'non-responsibility' rhetoric, a common characteristic of postcolonial narratives (Said, 1987), where the blame is allocated to advanced economies for investing primarily in 'brown' industries and moving carbon intensive facilities to developing countries, like Kazakhstan (interviews 4 & 9). Also, oil production is not seen as an environmental harm as it is mostly exported to the EU countries – hence, 'they are the real polluters' (interview 10). Such rhetoric is common for postcolonial states during climate change negotiations, where greater carbon reduction commitments are expected from the developed countries (Dubash, 2012; Rajao & Duarte, 2018).

Despite relative silence over climate change issues, the studied documents do acknowledge some associated problems. Climate change is seen as one of the threats to Kazakhstan's water security (e.g. 'Green Economy Concept'), which is then linked with other potential issues, including deteriorating agriculture, negative impacts on trade and national finances, and overall state stability ('Strategy 2020'). In these rare signs of vulnerability, we saw some allusions to the Soviet past where Kazakhstan became a victim of nature mismanagement (e.g. the Aral Sea). Dubuisson (2020) argues that environmental protection discourse is a responsibility discourse, and 'any conceptualisation of "land and environmental protection" is a multiply discursive perspective in which different models of responsibility are invoked' (p. 10). However, as the SU does not exist anymore, any attempts to blame it lose their value, especially, when considering that modern Kazakhstan continues to pursue similar approaches to nature (Kopack, 2019). Unsurprisingly, with regards to climate change we have not observed any explicit blame allocation (similar arguments can be seen in Poberezhskaya & Danilova, 2021). The finding is also supported by the conducted interviews, where acknowledgement of environmental problems caused by the SU go hand in hand with recollection of the benefits that the country used to enjoy:

> during the SU, indeed, there were such dangerous industries [. . .] But, nevertheless, there were many good things, for example, the capital of Almaty was a very green city (interview 5).

> people, of course, are very concerned about all of this [pollution accumulated during the Soviet time] [. . .] huge consequences, we still see now [. . .][but people talk about the USSR] not in a negative way, rather like this: [. . .] 'What do we do with this? [. . .] mostly people speak well of the past [. . .] the social privileges that there were (interview 4).

The Soviet past is reflected in the technocratic approach to environmental protection which is still evident in Kazakhstan. In this view, techno-scientific progress can resolve any environmental problems with no need to sacrifice economic advancement: 'we need to learn how to properly manage it [natural resources], saving our export revenues and, most importantly, transforming our natural resources into an efficient and sustainable vehicle for economic growth' ('Strategy-2050'). Indeed, the principle of prioritising the economy over the environment is strongly embedded in the state's policies: 'it is reported everywhere that we have "heavy" Soviet heritage when the economy was first, and environment last [. . .], but professional environmentalists see it is still the same' (interview 9). Furthermore, the experts argue that environmental policies have not seen any significant progress since the time of the SU as the state has been moving by inertia: with almost all environmental legislation and emission norms remaining unchanged (interview 11).

While the Soviet-inspired attitude towards the environment looks irrational in the light of the current environmental agenda and 'green' political efforts, the 'Soviet legacy' here can be explained by the struggle with national identity (Sakal, 2015). As one of the experts mentioned, the country is still under recognized abroad, and it is difficult to explain what Kazakhstan is without referring to its Soviet past (interview 3). Although environmental rhetoric contributes to the state's image and recognition at the international level (Weinthal & Watters, 2010), it is doubtful that such discourse brings a real change – as the approach to nature has not evolved.

Notably, within the ambiguous Kazakh national discourse, the image of the 'strong state' intertwines with the claims for international aid (Kudaibergenova, 2016a, p. 921).

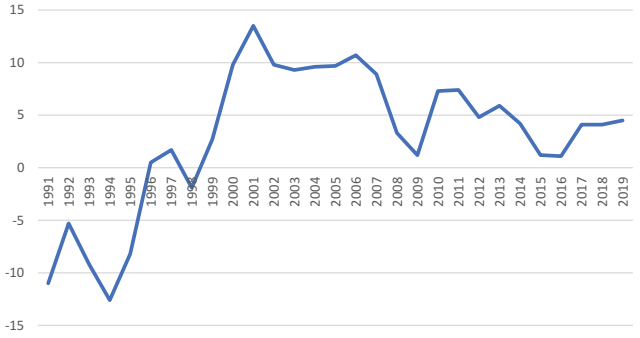

Figure 3. Economic Growth in Kazakhstan, %GDP, 1991–2019. Source: Authors' own elaboration based on data from the World Bank group (n.d.).

For example, Kazakhstan is shown as a key geographical hotspot, the owner of abundant resources which may gain additional value in the face of environmental changes, and as a responsible state contributing to the global agenda. Meanwhile, the identity of a developing state is supported through emphasis on foreign investments and need for financial support. In line with Schatz (2006), we explain this conundrum as a reassertion of Kazakhstan's postcolonial status. While the national economy is experiencing steady growth (see Figure 3), there are too many issues to touch upon regarding sustainable development, and it is hardly possible to achieve the proclaimed GHG emission reduction targets without external help (interview 3).

The alignment with international discourse invites financial support from international donors – thus there is little financial sense in climate denialism or scepticism (Poberezhskaya & Danilova, 2021) but instead the state presents climate policy as a policy of opportunities. Isaksen and Stokke (2014) identify a similar discursive turn in India's political discourse: the 'third world' rhetoric is currently being replaced by a 'win-win' discourse (p. 114). Remarkably, Kazakhstan's fossil fuel industries are not seen as a threat or a problem for sustainable development but in fact as 'a guarantee of safety for present and future generations' where 'the oil and gas complex' acts as 'a locomotive for the entire economy' ('Strategy-2050'). Hence, national and international policies and rhetoric hardly match: the positive global image that is being promoted and investments in the renewable sector are overshadowed by energy inefficiencies, inconsistent policies and a lack of experts in the country.

Conclusion

In 'Strategy-2050' Nazarbayev firmly stated that the 'economy is first, then politics' which of course includes environmental politics. This approach is evident in the way climate change is often framed within both discussions of economic benefits (e.g. increasing energy efficiency, receiving foreign investments) or potential economic losses (e.g. introduction of the carbon tax). Kazakhstan's commitments to the fossil fuel industry prevents a more sophisticated climate change mitigation policy. At the same time, policy processes and initiatives that do exist in the country are constrained by limited support for climate science and the low level of public awareness. This is further exacerbated by problems

with the institutionalisation and formalisation of the process, where decisions are impacted by those in the posts and/or their informal relations with interested parties (interview 2). Connected to this is the limited transparency of how decisions are made and the rationale behind them (ibid). Lastly, it does not help that the relevant state institutions tend to shift responsibility to one another rather than solving the issues collectively which is 'very much a Soviet way' of policymaking (interview 9, see also Mouraviev, 2021). The Soviet past also shows via instrumental attitudes towards the environment and the personification of the policy making process as well as its top-down approach. However, it did not manifest itself as part of the post-colonial rhetoric in Kazakhstan.

Based on the outlined findings, we suggest that relevant national and international policymakers should consider the following factors to advance climate change policy in Kazakhstan. Firstly, even if Kazakhstan's government decides to part with its resource-intensive industries and move away from dependency on fossil fuel exports, it will not be able to do so in a short period of time and without external support. As such, a move could potentially result in serious social and political problems (e.g. leading to destabilisation in the regions where extractive industries are essential to people's employment and/or to regional budgets) which is also an outcome of the Soviet legacy Kazakhstan has to deal with.[7] Therefore, sustainable climate change mitigation policy should consider not only economic but also social implications. Secondly, despite the large volume of oil, gas, and coal reserves in Kazakhstan, there is an ongoing discussion of the nation's energy security (Koulouri & Mouraviev, 2019) which presents an opportunity for highlighting the role of RES. Thirdly, the importance of Kazakhstan's interest in its national and international image-building should be used to the advantage of climate change policy. As Kazakhstan stays faithful to its 'multi-vector policy' and a desire to be seen as an important global actor, it will not be able to disengage from the global climate regime. Fourthly, a sound climate policy requires extensive support of national climate science as well as engagement with other important actors, such as NGOs, media and business communities.

Whilst this article offers a comprehensive overview of the official discourse on climate change in Kazakhstan (contributing to climate change discussions in the post-Communist space (e.g. Martus, 2019; Poberezhskaya, 2016, 2018; Poberezhskaya & Ashe, 2018)), future research endeavours would benefit from a combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis of media, science, activists and business discourses to see how they impact climate change politics in Kazakhstan. Furthermore, considering the importance of the international dimension of Kazakhstan's climate politics, the role of international organisations needs to be explored in greater detail with particular focus on engagement (or a lack of it) by regional organisations (Ambrosio, 2008; Izotov & Obydenkova, 2021; Libman & Obydenkova, 2013, 2018a, 2018b). Lastly, following our findings on the impact of the political regime and the head of the state over climate change politics in Kazakhstan, a nuanced study of authoritarianism and its effect on environmental policies in CA would also be beneficial.[8]

To conclude, the above analysis shows a mismatch between the representation of Kazakhstan's sustainable commitments and the real climate policy steps, in fact even the state's proud regional leadership is questioned: 'Kazakhstan is the leader in CA in terms of GHG emissions. What example can we set? Our emissions are growing, not decreasing [. . .] Maybe it is more an example in words, but in practice we didn't show it' (interview 11). Unfortunately, Kazakhstan is by far not the only country found in this predicament, where

rhetorical change is not met by adequate policy responses. Therefore, it is important for the stakeholders interested in advancing climate change policy in Kazakhstan to have a full understanding of the outlined objective and subjective factors impacting the state's position on this environmental problem.

Notes

1. For instance, in China, Kazakhstan's key strategic energy sector partner and the world's leading coal producer, the share of coal in its energy mix dropped by 66% and renewables' share reached 15% in 2020 (The Oxford Institute for Energy Studies, 2020).
2. Partly due to the Covid-19 pandemic (Climate Action Tracker, 2020).
3. See Figure 2 for Kazakhstan's GHG emissions' trajectory.
4. Weinthal and Watters (2010) notice that Nazarbayev was using the rhetoric of environmental concern as a tool for building his image and legitimacy both in the domestic and international arenas during his first years of leadership.
5. The base level is 401.87 million tons/year, and it was 396.57 in 2018
6. The concern over investments also underpins the recent silencing of coal production as the foreign sponsors (even China) are less motivated to support 'brown' industries (interview 10).
7. Like many other post-Communist countries (see: Kudaibergenova, 2016b; Lankina et al., 2016a; Libman & Obydenkova, 2019; Nazarov & Obydenkova, 2020; Pop-Eleches & Tucker, 2017) Kazakhstan has been and still is dealing with a diverse range of Soviet legacies, such as corruption, its dependence on Soviet trade ties and misinformation.
8. The importance of democracy (associated with decentralisation, transparency, and lower corruption) for environmental policy and agenda has been studied in Payne 1995; Fredriksson and Wollscheid (2007); Libman and Obydenkova (2014), Obydenkova and Salahodjaev (2016, 2017), Obydenkova et al. (2016); Fredriksson and Neumayer (2013)

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