

**Peculiarities and Paradoxes of Neoliberal Higher Education in Kazakhstan**Douglas L. Robertson<sup>a\*</sup> and Nazgul Bayetova<sup>a</sup><sup>a</sup>*Florida International University, USA*

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**ABSTRACT**

This article discusses the expression of neoliberalism in Kazakhstan's emerging higher education system. The central tenets of neoliberalism are briefly articulated. Noted is the phenomenon that the general political-economic paradigm of neoliberalism differs in its specific implementation depending on the particular countries and cultures in which it is manifesting. In Kazakhstan, neoliberalism's expression in the former Soviet Republic's emerging higher education system presents five paradoxes: (a) nationalistic globalism, (b) regulated non-regulation, (c) giving as a means to getting, (d) communal individualism, and (e) developmental demise. This article explores each of these five paradoxes.

*Keywords:* higher education, Kazakhstan, neoliberalism, paradox, policy analysis

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**INTRODUCTION**

Neoliberalism, which is arguably the globally dominant political-economic paradigm in the Post-Cold War era, has central tenets such as free markets, free trade, privatization,

deregulation, individualism, rationality, competition, meritocracy, low taxes, small government, and unfettered accumulation of individual wealth (Harvey, 2005; St. John et al., 2018; Steger & Roy, 2010). As Margaret Thatcher (1925-2013), former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom (1979-1990) and neoliberal spokesperson averred in 1987: “There's no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families.” Forget about the common good. Ronald Reagan (1911-2004), former President of the United States (1981-1989), had similar comments under the guise of advocating for small government, notwithstanding his ballooning deficit spending. Reagan and Thatcher had chemistry and were a dynamic duo in the Post-Cold War ascendancy of neoliberalism in Western democracies and formerly communist states.

Although neoliberalism is a singular political-economic paradigm, the way in which specific countries adopt neoliberalism has its peculiarities. For example, neoliberalism in the United States looks differently than neoliberalism in Russia. In Kazakhstan, a former Soviet Republic, the policies and practices of neoliberalism involve paradoxes. This study uses grounded theory as a methodological approach to analyze the official speeches of former President of the Republic of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev (1991-2019) and policy texts to advance higher education in Kazakhstan. A flexibility of grounded theory is that it allows researchers to utilize various data sources, including documents (Charmaz, 2006, 2011; Ralph et al., 2014). The NVivo software program was applied to code and analyze five sources of texts: (a) *Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development Report, 2017*; (b) *Strategy Kazakhstan, 2050*; (c) speeches of former President of the Republic of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev from 1994 to 2020; (d) *Nazarbayev University Strategic Development Plan, 2013-2020*; and (e) *Law on Education, 2007*. In this comparative analysis, we discuss five of Kazakhstan's neoliberal paradoxes within the context of its emerging higher education system: (a) nationalistic globalism,

(b) regulated non-regulation, (c) giving as a means to getting, (d) communal individualism, and (e) developmental demise.

### **NATIONALISTIC GLOBALISM**

Neoliberalism is not intrinsically nationalistic. It is the preferred political-economic paradigm of global corporate interests. A peculiar paradox of Kazakhstan is that, without using the word “neoliberalism,” its tenets are promoted nationalistically as a way for Kazakhstan to prosper as a country by transitioning from a resource-based economy to a knowledge-based economy. In articulating the strategy of Kazakhstan’s development to 2050, former President Nazarbayev stated:

Kazakhstan’s oil and gas complex remains the powerhouse of our economy, which facilitates the growth of other sectors. We have successfully created a modern and efficient oil, gas and mining sector. Our success in this area will help us to build a new economy of the future (Strategy Development 2050 of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2010, p.15).

The country’s leadership projected using plentiful oil and gas revenues to facilitate the transition to an advanced knowledge economy that is based primarily on knowledge and expertise.

Related to this transition and following a neoliberal paradigm, Kazakhstan has formulated the goal of improving the quality of its higher educational system, with Western standards and practices serving as key reference points. Nazarbayev served as President of Kazakhstan (1991-2019) from its independence until recently when he stepped down and transferred power to Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, who continues with Nazarbayev’s peculiar paradox in implementing neoliberal policies in Kazakhstan. Document analysis shows clearly that one of Nazarbayev’s major goals was to use higher education to foster national identity. In his 2009 presidential address, Nazarbayev emphasized the significance of Nazarbayev University, which took Nazarbayev’s

name, as well as the capital in 2019, Astana, which became Nur-Sultan. Nazarbayev connected Nazarbayev University to the country's nationalistic policy as follows:

Creation of the new university is the most important national project... [This project] will have a significant impact on many Kazakhstanis and the development of a backbone for our state. I believe that the new university... should be created as a national brand, harmoniously combining Kazakhstani identity with the best international educational and scientific practice (Address of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2009, para. 7).

In this sense, the establishment of a national university with international collaboration was a vital step to promote nationalism among the younger generation. Founded in 2010, Nazarbayev University is the country's flagship university that strives to combine Kazakh national identity with the best international educational and scientific practices. Nazarbayev University is the first Kazakh university that was created based on the principles of autonomy and academic freedom, although on closer scrutiny we can see that claims such as these are relative to the culture, which in Kazakhstan's case leans autocratic.

As we can see in our initial analysis of Nazarbayev's policy texts and speeches, countries such as Kazakhstan with economies reliant on natural resource revenue may attempt to create an alternative way to generate income, including implementing a shift from a resource-based economy to a knowledge-based economy. In this instance, the Kazakhstani government invested much money from oil revenues to develop a "world class university" with an emphasis on both nationalism and internationalization (Altbach, 2015). As outlined by Altbach (2015), central characteristics of world class universities include outstanding research recognized by peers, top quality faculty members, favorable working conditions, academic freedom and atmosphere of intellectual excitement, internal self-governance, and adequate funding. By adopting market-based

policies, Nazarbayev University has been attempting to fit the description of a world class university to gain recognition in the international intellectual arena. However, as described by Altbach (2015), Nazarbayev University can be distinguished from other similar projects in that the major mission of it is to create equal partnerships with American and British universities. Although the language of instruction is English, international faculty members can learn Kazakh for free while teaching and working at Nazarbayev University. Administration at Nazarbayev University consists of an equal number of locals and foreigners (Nazarbayev University Strategic Development Plan 2013-2020).

### **REGULATED NON-REGULATION**

Neoliberalism unleashes the psychological power and energy of opportunity, which creates vibrant economic growth and progression into the global economy. More wealth is created for power elites by unleashing the dream of previously unempowered individuals' and families' upward mobility. The prospect of unlimited opportunity is intoxicating and produces innovation. However, the opportunity is ultimately arbitrated by power elites who seek profit and preserve the power hierarchies and systems that deliver their profits. Ultimately, neoliberalism is a tool of greed. As fictional neoliberal icon Gordon Gekko declared in the Academy Award and Golden Globe Award-winning movie *Wall Street* (1987), "Greed is good!" One of the reasons why fiction can be so powerful is that, if done well, it can capture and distill broad realities in specific expressions like "Greed is good!" A centrally planned economy, which is a highly regulated economy, does not deliver wealth at a magnitude similar to neoliberal, unregulated, free markets.

Ironically, the concept of the free market was articulated by Adam Smith (1723-1790), a Scottish Enlightenment moral philosopher (Smith, 2005/1759) who perceived the free market as a way for commoners to prosper in the face of hereditary nobility and the Church. (Smith,

2017/1776). However, neoliberal, political-economic systems cannot sustain themselves in the face of unregulated greed (Harvey, 2005). They collapse and need huge, anti-neoliberal, Keynesian (1883-1946; Keynes, 1936) governmental infusions of cash (bailouts) as in the example of the 2008 Great Recession in the United States and with the economic decimation related to former president Trump's mismanagement of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019-2020. The parallel to exploiting and degrading the environment by denying the science of climate change for individual gain at the expense of the larger community is compelling. Let the market solve the problem. Privatization of solving these large problems – a neoliberal tenet – in virtually every sector creates the opportunity for profits without results, which enables more financial gain until the system is broken and a bailout is needed. The cycle is clear: neoliberalism as a tool of greed is not sustainable. In many ways, neoliberalism needs regulation to survive itself. Kazakhstan provides a perfect example of this peculiar paradox. Kazakhstan leadership uses the psychological motivation generated by apparent non-regulation to enliven a population to produce a knowledge economy quickly within the context of an overall system regulated by a power elite that will control and benefit most from the knowledge economy.

Kromydas (2017) argues that via globalization higher education systems in developing countries follow Western paths. To prevent failure, policy makers in developing countries tend to replicate only “successful” Western policies (Nicholson-Crotty & Carley, 2016). Silova (2004; 2009) analyzed the replication of Western education policies in the post-socialist states and described this process as *education policy borrowing*. Similar to other post-Soviet countries, Kazakhstan became a borrower country. In particular, in the early 1990s, Kazakhstan began adapting and replicating the American model of private education. Until the country gained political independence in 1991, all public universities were funded by the centralized Soviet

government for nearly 60 years. The private higher education sector simply did not exist. The growth in the number of Kazakhstani private higher education institutions since then can be attributed to the rise of neoliberalism.

To recreate a successful American higher education model, over 60 new, private universities emerged in Kazakhstan after the introduction of the “Law on Higher Education” in 1993 (Sagintayeva & Kurakbayev, 2015). Private universities were founded in each major city after obtaining a license from the Kazakhstan Ministry of Education and Science. Whereas the most prestigious and high-ranking universities in the U.S. tend to be private, such institutions do not maintain the same respect and touted reputations in Kazakhstan. Although the country has carried out comprehensive privatization reforms of its higher education system since independence, private universities have a negative reputation in the intellectual community and general public. Fewer students enter private institutions than public universities in Kazakhstan, although the number of state-owned schools is almost two times lower than the number of private universities. 52 percent of Kazakhstan’s higher education enrollment falls under the public university sector (Bayetova & Robertson, 2019). Furthermore, faculty members at private universities experience fewer opportunities to conduct high-quality research due to the shortage of well-equipped laboratories and libraries. Some private universities have also been involved in scandals related to the selling of diplomas and grades to students (Bayetova & Robertson, 2019). Due to this cause and others, many of the private universities have been suspended or closed within the last 30 years.

### **GIVE TO GET**

Neoliberalism is a powerful and complex economic, political and cultural system that infuses market values in many aspects of policy and daily life within national and global societies.

Neoliberalism is associated with individual freedom and rationality of choice. With an intensified drive for personal freedom, education transforms from representing a public good to a private good. In Kazakhstan, after the transition to a market-based system universities introduced tuition charges. Due to the shortage of monetary support for public higher education, a financial burden of college tuition was created for students and their families. In the previous Soviet system, the communist government funded higher education. In the centrally planned economy of the USSR, students were assigned a university and curriculum, but they did not have to pay tuition (Azimbayeva, 2017; Maksutova, 2004).

On the contrary, with the neoliberal policies in independent Kazakhstan, government interference was minimized by providing students more choices in the types of universities, funding opportunities, and degrees. In 2005's annual presidential address to the nation, Nazarbayev acknowledged the government's responsibility to support the talented and the bright:

We have many talented boys and girls who are willing and able to become engineers or technologists. Through education grants and credits, the government will help them in a very real way. I urge the private sector to join actively in this initiative (Address of the President Nazarbayev to the People of Kazakhstan, 2005, para.168).

In the same speech, Nazarbayev speculated, "At the same time the government should create a modern system of student loans to be offered through second-tier banks and backed by state guarantees" (Address of the President Nazarbayev to the People of Kazakhstan, 2005, para. 202).

Ultimately, a loan industry was created in order to support the tuition costs for individual students.

This tradeoff is common in neoliberal paradigms: freedom, but at a cost. Kazakhstan's higher education system follows this familiar pattern of privatization where something is given (freedom of choice) but at a cost (tuition and fees which create individual student loan debt). Power



elites get something (increased wealth) from giving something (individual choice). Of course, the key is not to break the system that is providing the wealth accumulation: loan terms must be high to increase profits but not so high that individuals cannot accept them. In the same year as his speech about initiating governmental support for the nation's university students, Nazarbayev directed the creation of a modern student loan system offered by all second-tier banks in Kazakhstan, except the National Bank, and backed by state guarantees (Address of the President Nazarbayev to the People of Kazakhstan, 2005). The market logic is obvious.

After independence, there was a need for funding students' participation in the neoliberalization of the Kazakhstani higher education system. As tuition charges were introduced, the government provided students with educational grants and loans in a competitive and merit-based system. Following the premises of neoliberalism, educational grants and loans are given directly to students, not to universities: "Students receive voucher-like education grants that they carry with them to the public or private institution of their choice, so long as they choose to study a grant-carrying subject" (OECD report, 2017, p. 88). As transportable grants and loans, students can spend them at the university of their choice (Law on Education, 2007). Merit-based funding, in contrast to need-based funding, benefits more privileged students who go to better schools, can afford tutoring, and have access to more and higher quality technological tools because of income and network advantages (St. John et al., 2018).

### **COMMUNAL INDIVIDUALISM**

In antiquity, the territory of Kazakhstan was inhabited by nomads, including the Scythians whose fierce tribes eventually worked their way west across Europe and became the Celts of Ireland and Scotland. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the territory of Kazakhstan was conquered by Genghis Khan and became part of the Mongolian Empire. Mongolian culture features a distinct

communalism contrary to the radical individualism of neoliberalism. In addition, Kazakhstan was a Soviet Republic for 55 years (1936-1991) during which time it was ruled by Soviet-style communism. Conversely, neoliberalism is founded on individualism.

The influxes of global policy reforms tend to spread and diffuse around the world and socially and politically reshape various social orders with dissimilar narratives (Simola et al., 2013). Neoliberal globalization has had radical implications on the cultures and traditions of various countries. One of the core attributes of neoliberalism when it is at work within a society is the development of self-interest with an emphasis on individual rights. Historically, Kazakhstan has represented a community-based, family-bound, collective society (Kabayeva et al., 2018). However, after the introduction of a market system, Nazarbayev called for a shift to modern, individualistic citizenry in his 1998 speech: “Collective responsibility equals no responsibility. Collective responsibility is the enemy of accountability” (Address of the President Nazarbayev to the People of Kazakhstan, 1998, para. 7).

It is a peculiar paradox that the neoliberal emphasis on individualism has also been prioritized in Kazakhstan’s higher education, this profound change was explained by Nazarbayev in his 1997 presidential address: “State-and-collective world outlook was replaced by a private-and-individual one and the event reversed each and every aspect of our life” (Address of the President Nazarbayev to the People of Kazakhstan, 1997, para 18). For example, instead of a cohort of students attending the same courses each semester, the policy makers forged an “individual path of courses” for each student (Law on Education, 2007, para 12). This alternative policy allows students to complete courses based on their individual preferences as part of their degree.

Another example would be the emphasis in our preliminary analysis of policy speeches and strategic plans on developing higher education systems that support the development of human capital in the form of individual students and scholars in order to move the collective (the country of Kazakhstan) into the knowledge economy. Individualism was emphasized via the creation of an individual approach to education: individualized plan of study and student individual work with faculty (Law on Education, 2007).

### **DEVELOPMENT DEMISE**

Encouraging sophisticated, critically thinking, Western-influenced, young adults who will innovate and build Kazakhstan's human and economic capital may destabilize rather than stabilize Kazakhstan's movement from an autocratic, resource-based economy to an individualistic, neoliberal, knowledge economy. It is a peculiar paradox of Kazakhstan that this Western education, which is promoted significantly by Kazakhstan's Bolashak Scholarship Program, will support democratic values that will undermine Kazakhstan's traditional culture and autocratic leaning.

In 1993, former President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev initiated a state-funded international scholarship called the "Bolashak" Scholarship. (Bolashak means "future" in Kazakh.) The purpose of the scholarship is for Kazakhstani students to pursue education abroad in the world's most prestigious universities in the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, China, Australia, and other countries. Since then, over 10,000 Kazakh students have studied abroad, earned degrees, and returned to Kazakhstan to fulfill the scholarship's obligations to serve the nation (Kucera, 2014). According to Bolashak requirements, recipients of the scholarship have to maintain a high grade point average (at least 3.0) during their studies and graduate on time. After graduation, Bolashak Scholars must return to Kazakhstan within 25 days unless special conditions

related to their education allow them to return at a later date. After returning to Kazakhstan, Bolashak Scholars are obligated to work in the country for five years and submit employment verification to the government every six months.

Educating students in democratic states inevitably brings Western liberal values and constitutes challenges for authoritarian ruling republics such as Kazakhstan. Western education tends to emphasize critical thinking, which Kazakh students can apply to challenge the government for corruption and systemic oppression.

Bolashak Scholars have been known to experience “reverse culture shock” upon returning to Kazakhstan after studying abroad (Del Sordi, 2017, p. 220). Western liberal education, with its emphasis on critical thinking and freedom of expression, can be a vehicle for developing highly intellectual, liberal rebels and activists. A clear paradox exists as the government orders the most capable, young intellectuals to pursue education abroad who, in turn, could return to grow an opposition force to the current system of leadership. Nevertheless, since the creation of the program, few Bolashak Scholars have been involved in criticism of the authoritarian state structure. Bolashak graduates tend to be promoted to leadership positions in the government. Those who comply with the regime become successful and influential political figures in Kazakhstan. In a peculiar paradox, the Bolashak Scholars Program buttresses the infrastructure of the current Kazakhstani, authoritarian-leaning power system while also planting the seeds of that system’s opposition. Bolashak Scholars who are not in government positions are sometimes outspoken and civically engaged leaders who establish human rights organizations that involve the protection of women and children, anti-discrimination efforts on the basis of gender, transformation of the judicial system, and anti-corruption agencies. Through this paradoxical trend, some Bolashak Scholars develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills, which they use to innovate and

create capital value for companies and the government, but do not apply these abilities to foment change in the larger Kazakhstani socio-political system.

### **CONCLUSION**

Policy analysis can sometimes introduce false binaries. For example, are the policies of a nation liberal or autocratic? The concept of paradox is a useful tool to counteract this tendency toward convenient, and perhaps simplistic, cognitive dualities and to allow for the discussion of proper nuance in policy. In this discussion, we began with the idea that a single paradigm, neoliberalism in this case, will have behavioral expressions that are peculiar depending on the national context, and we have employed the concept of paradox to discuss the nuances of these peculiarities. We hope that you find this discussion of Kazakhstan interesting and that this analytical methodology (peculiarity and paradox) is useful to you in other scholarly contexts.

### **AUTHOR NOTE**

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