

Third, the issue of language policy has fostered serious tension between the two communities, not least because less than one per cent of ethnic Russians speak Kazakh.¹⁸ Nazarbaev's government was under significant pressure from the nationalist movement to give the Kazakh language pride of place in the Kazakh constitution. On the other hand, any substantial emigration of Russians would have been economically disastrous. The compromise the Supreme Soviet arrived at was to insert a provision into the state constitution which declared Kazakh to be the sole language of state and Russian the language of "interethnic communication."²⁰ This mollified Kazakh nationalist opinion to a limited extent, but failed to satisfy Russian political leaders who argued that this accorded Russian inferior status.

Fourth, the Russian community (and other Europeans) are disturbed by what appears to be a policy of affirmative action, of gradually filling the upper ranks of the bureaucracy and state enterprises with ethnic Kazakhs.²¹ As a result, they feel that opportunities for advancement on the basis of merit and prior education and experience are being constrained. Some Russian groups also maintain that Russians are discriminated against in housing and access to other resources controlled by the state.²²

Given the potential for interethnic conflict in the country, the government has done a surprisingly good job of holding the lid on. There is some prospect, however, that as political weight in Russia moves towards the right and as Russian foreign policy towards the Central Asian states becomes more assertive (see below), conflict will grow. Aside from the economic issues discussed above, the issue of Kazakh-Russian relations is the most serious one facing Kazakhstan in the near term.

ii) Islam

The role of Islam in the Central Asian republics is generally viewed to be a serious potential source of instability both by Russians and by Western analysts. The

¹⁸ In Almaty, it is estimated that less than 0.6 per cent of Russians speak Kazakh.

²⁰ For Nazarbaev's own justification of this approach, see "Suverennyi Kazakhstan otvechaet za ravnopravie drugikh natsii", *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* (January 6, 1994), p.3.

²¹ This analysis is somewhat simplistic. What appears to be happening is that Nazarbaev is filling government posts with members of the Great Horde of Kazakhs, one of three subdivisions within the Kazakh nation. The other two subdivisions are also being excluded.

²² See the account of a meeting of Russian societies in Northern Kazakhstan, as reported in *RFE/RL Weekly Report* (December 22, 1993).