

<https://doi.org/10.53277/2519-2442-2022.3-05>ISSN 2519-2442, KAZAKHSTAN  
Book Review**DARK SHADOWS:  
INSIDE THE SECRET WORLD OF KAZAKHSTAN**Saken MUKAN <sup>1</sup><sup>1</sup> Narxoz University, 050035 Almaty, Kazakhstan; e-mail: [saken.mukan@narxoz.kz](mailto:saken.mukan@narxoz.kz),

ORCID: 0000-0003-0652-2806

---

**Received:** 22.06.2022**Accepted:** 06.07.2022

---

**Joanna Lillis.** *Dark Shadows: Inside the Secret World of Kazakhstan.* Bloomsbury Academic, 2nd edition, 2022. pp. 368.

The internal and external issues of Kazakhstan since independence have always been of particular interest to the Western community, in particular journalists, public figures, politicians and ordinary citizens of the West. The image of the country most of all reflected the reality in which it lives and functions as an actor in international relations, while the public policy and foreign policy image of the country met the interests of the local elite to position themselves as a progressive model for conducting public administration affairs. Kazakhstan, being at the crossroads of world civilizations and major world superpowers, having a balanced foreign policy, is trying to be the bridge that unites both cultural diversity and have fairly wide economic privileges and benefits from its geographical location, having a huge potential of energy resources and a growing boom in the intellectual potential of its population by and large.

In this context, the book by Joanna Lillis, *Dark Shadows - Inside The Secret World of Kazakhstan* deserves the attention of readers due to the fact that, while being in Kazakhstan, the author tries to reveal and show to the Western reader in the language of journalism her vision to convey in simple language without difficulties of understanding how the post-Soviet country positions itself in the outside world from the inside and how the construction of modern state Kazakhstan reflects the historical past where there used to be ambiguous interpretations and misunderstandings based on metropolis-oriented colonial discourse. Symbolically and enthusiastically, the author begins her book by citation of Kazakh Poet Abay Kunanbayuly describing that *from harsh winter with thick snow followed by a good summer with thick grass and bountiful lakes* that is to say in Kazakh history there were black and white days in nation-state building. Afterwards compiling a chronology (*Kazakhstan historical timeline*): starting with the foundation of the Kazakh Khanate (1465) and ending with the trials of the opposition leaders of modern Kazakhstan (DVK) in 2018.

The book consists of three parts; each Part consists of nine chapters. The first part named *The Making of a Potentate* where the author considers the formation of the First President of the country, Nazarbayev, as a political leader and builder of an independent country that had just left the USSR. A Part of the book describes Nazarbayev's struggle with opposition leaders in order to gain a foot-

hold in power. The attention of the journalist is also paid to the main opponent of Nazarbayev Mukhtar Ablyazov, whom she interviewed after his escape from Kazakhstan to London personally. Particular emphasis is placed on the political activity of his son-in-law Rakhat Aliyev, under whom he died under mysterious circumstances in the Vienna prison. Also, the author pays attention to the ambiguous reaction to the Zhanaozen events of 2011, where, according to the author, peaceful labor demonstrators were shot by the security forces in eyes of local residents during the celebration of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of independence. The author tried to reveal the internal features of the political regime, in which the Nazarbayev regime had ambiguous wide popularity within the country, having very strong tools in positioning Kazakhstan in a very positive image to the outside world. In general, the first part of *The Making of a Potentate* is composed purely of a personal journalistic investigation while telling various stories by local citizens in building an authoritarian state by and large.

In the second part of the book, the author focuses on *Crises Identity*, she tries to understand how independent Kazakhstan will be able to formulate its national identity having a diverse historical past, by the fact that a large number of Kazakhs who, due to historical unfair moments, left the country at different periods in their history and how they return to their historical homeland in building an independent Kazakhstan constructing a national identity of modern Kazakhs. At the same time, Kazakhstan was settled by many diverse ethnic groups on its land where they were placed not only in concentration camps for traitors to the motherland but mixed with local customs and culture. Learning the Kazakh language helped the author to understand deeply the *Crises Identity* in Kazakhstan as well as the level of “writing history” of Kazakh people by Russians and Soviets to identify the Kazakh ethnical belonging etc.

In the third part of the book, the author emphasized *Stories from the Steppe* about the influence of the Soviet system of lifestyle on the vast Kazakh steppe, in relation to religion, collective farms, intercultural everyday disagreements, in which the vast steppe land recalled the picture that was in the history of Kazakhstan, namely the Russian-Soviet colonization of the Kazakh steppes where Russian merchants owned suitable pastures and did not give local shepherds to graze their cattle in suitable pastures, etc. The author made a special emphasis on the so-called «cultural wars», where a poster was posted in the center of Almaty at the corner of Kurmangazy and Pushkin streets, the kiss of the great Kazakh composer Kurmangazy and the great Russian writer Pushkin, where the conservative part of the city reacted ambiguously to the «humor» of the poster’s author. The incident reached the Ministry of Culture of Kazakhstan which called this «spectacle» a crime. At the same time, the Russian political party «Rodina» also issued a statement on the bewilderment of such a «spectacle» in the largest city of Kazakhstan. In general, the Part was focused on the formation of modern Kazakhstan with the influence of neighboring countries in building a legal and democratic state with its own «specificity» on the level of corruption index perception and a deep historical past in order to understand and convey to the Western audience the modern rapidly developing Kazakhstan so far.

In summary, if we talk about the book as a whole, then it was written in the classical «western» style with the elements of the local culture of understanding the facts and reality happening in the country. The title of the book itself says a lot and attracts both internal and external readers to understand the huge

potential of Kazakhstan with a small population, where this population today has intellectual potential, and the country is trying to develop human potential and resources in order to leave that legacy for the future generation, that the country will periodically face and solve its problems in a constructive way. The author of the book has done a great job of collecting data, such as interviews, archival data on historical events in the past, analysis of news feeds, analysis of legislative acts, etc. The source base deserves great attention and the interest of the readers, no matter external or internal, especially today when the concept of «New Kazakhstan» is being translated and told by the expert community after the bloodshed January 2022 events in Kazakhstan.