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Arts and the city in post-Soviet contexts: Policy pathways and interventions in urban cultural development in Kazakhstan

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ABSTRACT

This paper reflects on urban cultural development in a post-Soviet context. Most literature on arts and the city focuses either on Western cities, often recovering from post-industrial decline, or emerging global cities. However, post-socialist cities have remained under-investigated. The paper argues that the existing accounts of urban cultural development often underestimate the impact of national policy frameworks and historical trajectories. In post-Soviet countries, these national dynamics—often responding to broader diplomatic and cultural shifts—need to be considered. The paper uses the case study of Kazakhstan and its two major cities Almaty and Astana (recently renamed Nur-Sultan) to explore the role of path dependence and national policy in urban cultural development. It concludes by arguing for integrating a complexity perspective into the study of arts and the city, looking at macro policy and infrastructural changes, meso local urban responses, and micro dynamics of collaboration and work amongst creative and cultural practitioners in cities.

Introduction

Literature and academic research on arts and the city has been dominated by accounts from Western cities, often undergoing processes of regeneration from post-industrial decline in Europe and the U.S. (Evans, 2009; Markusen & Gadwa, 2010). In the last 15 years more research and publications have expanded this horizon including research from the Global South (Foster, 2011; Gregory, 2016) as well as Asia and South-East Asia (Comunian & Ooi, 2016; Lee & Lim, 2014; Yeoh, 2005). However, within this expanded literature that tries to acknowledge context-specific and local dynamics in the relationship between arts and cultural development and cities, we acknowledge that research on post-Soviet cities and countries is still minimal. There has been some research on cities (often capital cities) of post-socialist countries that entered the European Union such as Poland, Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania (Aglinskas, 2014; Grazuleviciute-Vileniske, 2014), which acknowledges their distinctive pathway toward cultural development, dealing with a complex dialogue between national identity and diplomacy. With this paper, we extend Borén and Young's (2016) reflection that research on the creative city discourse in post-socialist countries is one where "post-socialist urban experience and post-socialist urban studies are marginalized and making less impact on global urban studies theory formation" (p. 596). This seems to be even more the case when moving beyond countries that have reconnected with their European history and future, which is why we look at countries in Central Asia that have had further struggles to define their geo-political and cultural independence after the Soviet Union eventually collapsed in December 1991.

In this paper, we focus on urban cultural development in Kazakhstan, through the lens of its two major cities Almaty and Astana (now Nur-Sultan)¹. The case study of Kazakhstan we

¹ The research was conducted during 2016–2018 and therefore in this paper, we use the denomination Astana, which was the city's name during the research project. In March 2019, suddenly the city was renamed Nur-Sultan after President Nursultan Nazarbayev resigned from his long-term role between 1990 and 2019.

believe has the potential to make interesting contributions to the current knowledge of the relationship between arts and the city for many reasons. Firstly, it acknowledges the importance of historical international political shifts, such as the dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), in providing long-term trajectories and pathways for the development of arts and culture in cities as well as the importance of bringing such macro-dynamics into our understanding of how arts and culture respond to changes and are shaped by them. Secondly, it presents an interesting dynamic in the relationship between urban cultural development and national policy. This is often underestimated in the current Western-focused literature where cities are empowered to act entrepreneurially and as neoliberal agents almost detached from the state (Jessop, 2019). In December 1997, the Republic of Kazakhstan officially moved its capital city from Almaty (that had been its capital for 68 years) to Astana (known before as Akmola). This top-down major policy decision (and infra-structural shift) had a significant impact on the development of arts in both cities and provides a very fertile ground to reflect on the relationship between national and urban agendas in the arts. Finally, reflecting specifically on the role of policy not only at the national but also at the city level, we articulate the need to adopt a complexity perspective (Comunian, 2011, 2019). This allows for a consideration of how policy interconnects with the development of arts in the city at multiple levels: it acknowledges the role of national (macro) policies and institutions, urban (meso) policy bodies and policymakers as well as local (micro) interactions of cultural practitioners and artists in the city.

The paper is articulated in five parts. Firstly, we review the existing literature on arts and the city concerning post-Soviet countries and also reflect on the literature in relation to top-down policy interventions that shape urban cultural development positively and negatively. We then introduce the context of Kazakhstan and the changes that have affected the recent urban cultural development of its two major cities: Almaty and Astana. In the third section, we introduce the methodology of the research project and data collected in the two case studies. In the discussion, we articulate our findings around the role of macro national policy dynamics on the relation between arts and the city under three headlines: macro changes between legacy and independence; urban changes and local responses to power shifts; micro-level opportunity for re-balancing dependence, and engagement. We conclude by reflecting on the importance of using a complexity perspective in understanding the relationship between arts and the city. Within this perspective, we highlight the need for more academic inquiries into the interaction between top-down policy interventions and urban cultural ecologies.

Literature review

Urban cultural development in post-Soviet cities: Current knowledge

The dissolution of the Soviet Union, which started in the second half of the 1980s and ended for good in December 1991, led to wide-ranging political, economic, social, and cultural transformations across and within its 15 member states. In turn, these profound changes at the national and transnational levels had significant effects on the subsequent development of the state's cities making post-socialist cities a popular avenue for urban research (Kotus,

2006; Sailer-Fliege, 1999; Stanilov, 2007). Most of this research, however, is devoted to exploring economic, institutional, societal, political, and spatial transformations, with only a few studies focusing specifically on urban transformations in relation to arts, culture, and creativity (Stryjakiewicz et al., 2010, 2013, 2014). Furthermore, the above literature is almost exclusively dedicated to cities in Eastern and Central Europe (ECE), completely marginalizing the non-European post-socialist cities of Central Asia, which is where this paper makes a significant contribution. Nevertheless, from the extant literature, we can identify certain themes that are very much applicable for the present inquiry into the realm of arts and culture in the unfamiliar territory of Kazakh cities.

The literature highlights the importance of the socialist past in understanding a post-socialist city today (Borén & Gentile, 2007). Accordingly, certain legacy aspects emerge as particularly important. For instance, past experiences of central planning and centralized administrative systems prove to be sticky and difficult to overcome (Collier, 2011). Thus, policymaking systems across the post-socialist states remain relatively centralized, meaning that the state governments make most of the decisions, leaving very little real authority to municipalities (Stryjakiewicz et al., 2013). Besides, having no prior experience in conducting local policy, cities are usually unequipped to handle such authority anyway (Zsomboki & Bell, 1997). This is why cities with prior traditions in decentralized decision-making had smoother transitions after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Stryjakiewicz et al., 2013).

A similar line of reasoning has been applied to the post-socialist development of cultural policy and as Jakobson et al. (2016, p. 3) highlight “in contrast to Western states where cultural policies are deeply embedded in relative stable historical and political contexts, the former Soviet-Bloc countries had no established blueprints of their own to fall back on.” The authors found that in post-Soviet /contemporary Russia cultural policy returned to the “conservative welfare regime” (see Zimmer & Toepler, 1996, p. 171) with the state regaining its central role in the cultural sector after private initiatives were unable to sustain it. Yet, they discovered a slight change in dynamics between the artistic elite and policymakers where “the former does not so much question the top-level bureaucracy’s dominance in determining the cultural policy as it tries to persuade this bureaucracy to attach more significance to its needs” (Jakobson et al., 2016, p. 14). Perhaps, this argumentation has even more credibility in the context of Kazakhstan, where people had less experience with the values, norms and institutions of the Western world.

Furthermore, researchers also address the “disorganized and disorganizing” (Cocks, 1980, p. 232) nature of Soviet administrative structure, including cultural governance (Rindzevičiūtė, 2008), which seemed to outlive the regime itself in the form of “a deficiency of official institutions or their antiquated style of operation” (Stryjakiewicz et al., 2010, p. 110). Likewise, the Soviet legacy of the pervasive second economy—the private economic activities that supplemented the first, command, economy—and informal practices (see Ledeneva, 1998) like abuse of power, exchange of bribes, clientelism, nepotism, and so on have been shortlisted by geographers as an influential aspect in shaping the post-Soviet cities (Borén & Gentile, 2007). The cultural sector in Kazakhstan, and in particular its governance, has not been immune to these practices either. Nauruzbayeva (2011b) found that at least within the art market “the Soviet-era state–market relations, based on state sponsorship, clientelism, and personalistic networks both persist and find new meaning in contemporary Kazakhstan”

(p. 392). The author uncovered fascinating interconnections between the extensive authority of the (now former) President Nazarbayev and the behavior of the Kazakh art market where certain artists relied on producing portraits of the first president to enhance the monetary value of their artworks.

Finally, it has been argued that the instrumental use of capital cities' urban space in some post-Soviet countries in itself is a continuity from the Soviet past, even if this is with some new configurations. For instance, it has been said that the capitals of Belarus and Kazakhstan are built on "various aspects of socialist urban legacy—from the concentration of power and instrumentality of urban space to the former iconic buildings of the socialist period" (Bekus, 2017, p. 794).

Arts and the city: Reframing the role of policy across scales

There is certainly a large body of research that looks at the role of policy in the development of arts and culture in contemporary cities (Evans, 2009). Influenced by the development of new global urban competition and branding on one side (Anttiroiko, 2015) and increased neoliberal urban agenda (Hall, 2006) on the other, we see cities becoming more independent and entrepreneurial in cultural and arts policy strategies. However, in this article, we argue that often there is little acknowledgment of the politics of scales in arts and cultural policy development as well as their nested and interconnected nature across the complexity of the development of creativity at the urban level (Comunian, 2011, 2019).

Arts and the city is often described in many case studies as an urban policy matter (Ponzini & Rossi, 2010); however, it often connects with global competition and global titles and brands, and therefore inevitably links into forms of global governance, see, for example, the UNESCO Creative City Network (Rosi, 2014). The national scale has also been found critical in shaping certain urban policies and concepts (i.e. smart city), yet it remains overlooked within the urban policy literature (Varró & Bunders, 2019). Recent critiques point out the need to look at policy mobility, as in relation to creative city policies, "in the context of multi-scalar relationships between urban, national and supranational influences" (Borén et al., 2020, p. 3). Nevertheless, the general lack of acknowledgment of the broader complexity of cultural policy on the urban scale might come from a bias toward the study of Western and neoliberal and global cities, which can be often seen as acting independently from a national framework due to their economic and political power (Cunningham, 2012). We argue, in the case of Kazakhstan, and possibly other post-Soviet countries or emerging economies, the complex interaction between the national (as also a defining new framework against pre-independence previous historical versions of the national), the urban, and the local provides an interesting lens to read urban cultural development as a long-term struggle and negotiation rather than a given.

When looking at the relationship between arts and the city traditional frameworks of analysis, such as the one of Markusen and Gadwa (2010), the role of *people* (cultural workers, supporters, participants), *business, and organizations* (including arts nonprofits, cultural firms, public arts agencies) and *place* (including cultural regions, cities, and neighborhoods) are highlighted as main components. In these accounts, policy seems to remain hidden within the characteristics of place and within that specific urban scale. However, we argue that, in

these models, policy (at different scales) needs to acquire more centrality. We propose that an analysis of arts and the city needs to acknowledge the different scales through which policy engages and interacts with people, business and organization and place.

In [Figure 1](#) below we try to unpack the different scales at which cultural policy and policy more broadly interact with urban cultural development and how they interconnect with each other, in a nested and embedded way (Swyngedouw & Heynen, 2003). It is easier to provide examples of how macronational policies on culture and beyond influence meso and micro levels as top-down interventions. Examples could include the establishment of a new national museum in a city or politics of decentralization such as in the case of the BBC moving its UK operations from London to Manchester/Salford (Noonan, 2012). However, meso and micro can also influence higher level of policy, for example, the proclaimed success of Liverpool 2008 European Capital of Culture, which inspired the Department of Culture Media and Sport (DCMS) in UK to start a new UK City of Culture event and title (DCMS, 2009). Bottom-up changes can happen; often they only happen through networking, negotiation, or working groups rather than via direct policy interventions.

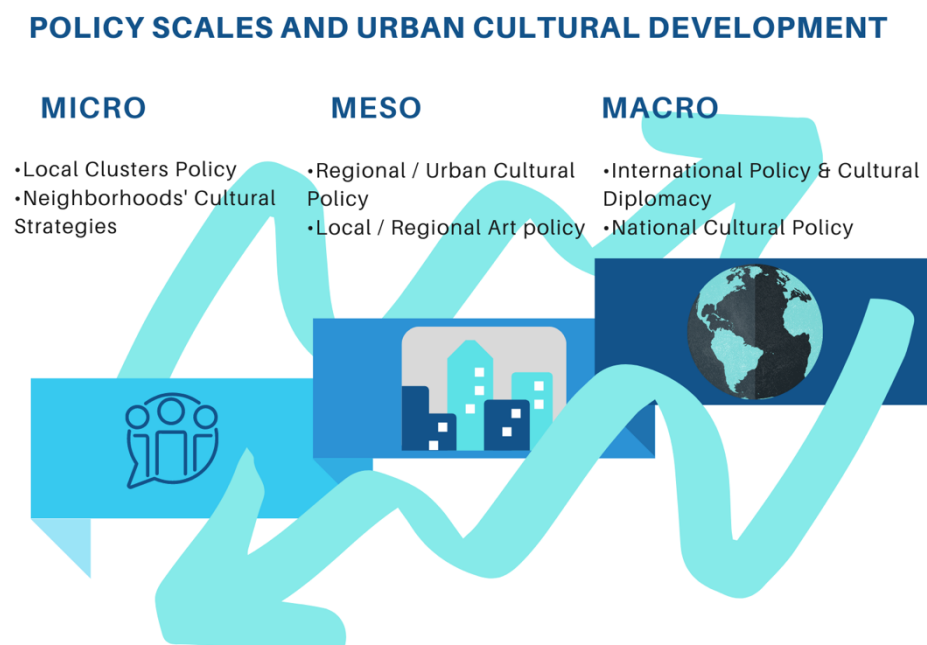


Figure 1. Policy scale and urban cultural development.

In this paper, we are specifically interested in the role that (macro) national policy changes have on the (meso) urban level as well as how (micro) arts and cultural organization might be shaped and respond to these changes at meso and macro levels.

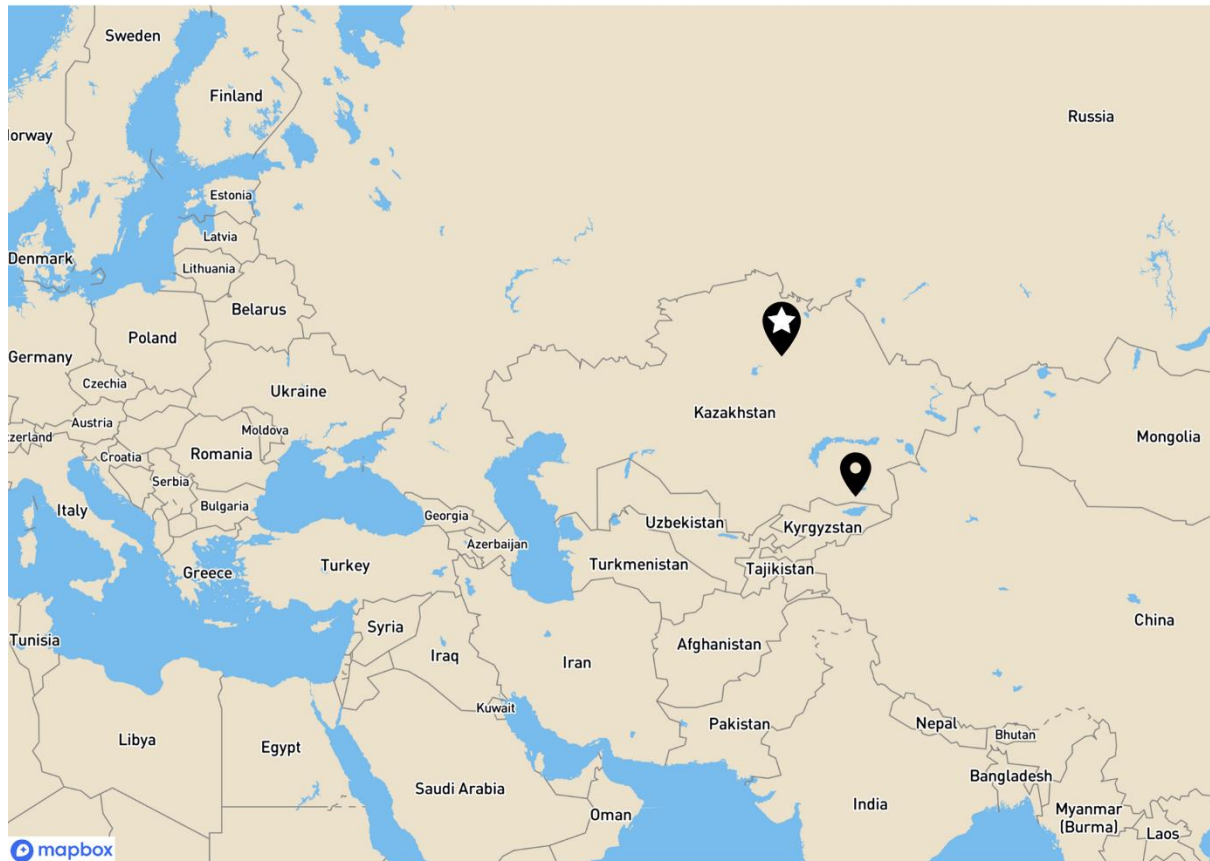
Of course, it is essential to point out that for other researchers the macro can also be articulated as reflecting international policy dynamics (Varró & Bunders, 2019), which also

play an important role in cultural policy, but are not the specific focus of this paper. While for others, in the field of sustainable cities, the category of super-macro is used to reflect on the international scale (Yigitcanlar et al., 2015). There is also broader literature and the debate pro and against scale in the human (and urban) geography literature that cannot be fully addressed here (see, for example, Jonas, 2006).

In discussing the way local policymakers and cultural producers have engaged with macro and meso changes, we use the framework proposed by Cox (1998) distinguishing between “spaces of dependence” and “spaces of engagement.” Cox (1998, p. 2) argues that we depend on certain spaces—like a city or an area of a city—for “the realization of essential interests” and that therefore these places “define place specific conditions for our sense of well-being” and accomplishment. In this respect, the city is often the main “space of dependence” for artists and creative producers, so they need to adapt to its structures and conditions and the opportunities it offers. However, Cox (1998, p. 2) also talks about “space of engagement” as the opportunity for organizations and individuals to “secure the conditions for the continued existence of their spaces of dependence.” He argues that for this to happen institutions and individuals need to “engage with other centers of social power: local government, the national press, perhaps the international press, for example” (Cox, 1998). It is interesting in the case of Astana and Almaty to reflect on whether there are bottom-up opportunities for individuals to engage in spaces of engagement to shape their spaces of dependence. In the paper, we use the complexity of scales in cultural development (Comunian, 2019) and Cox’s distinction between spaces of engagement and spaces of dependence as a theoretical framework. Within this framework, we aim to address two research questions. Firstly, we explore how the capital relocation has directly impacted and re-shaped the cultural development trajectory of the two cities; secondly, we consider what responses have developed at the meso and micro level to this top-down intervention.

Kazakhstan national and urban cultural development

In order to understand the development of the relationship between the arts and the two cities of Almaty and Astana (now Nur-Sultan) (see Figure 2), it is important to offer a historical background to Kazakhstan’s national and urban cultural development beginning with its independence. The Republic of Kazakhstan is the world’s largest landlocked country, and the ninth largest country in the world with a land area equal to that of Western Europe. Its territory stretches geographically from Eastern Europe to China. It is the dominant nation of Central Asia economically, as it generates around 55% of the region’s GDP, primarily through its oil and gas industry (CIA, 2019). The population, estimated at 18.7 million in 2019, is relatively small in size but highly diverse with 68% Kazakhs, 19% Russians, and many other smaller ethnic groups populating the territories such as Uzbeks, Ukrainians, Germans, Tatars, and Uyghurs (*Ibidem*).



Astana (Capital of Kazakhstan since 1997; renamed Nur-Sultan in 2019)



Almaty (Capital of Kazakhstan 1929-1997)

Figure 2. Map of Kazakhstan with the location of its current and former capital city. Map generated via @Mapbox and @Openstreet.

Cultural policy in Kazakhstan: The Soviet era and its legacy

Cultural governance was an extremely important task for the Soviet State leaders from the outset. This is because culture was perceived as a key instrument in realizing the fundamental objective of the communist regime: culture was seen as a tool for developing the masses by equipping them with “the knowledge, skills, and, more importantly, worldviews that, according to communist thinking, would be in demand in future society” (Jakobson et al., 2016). Therefore, the organization of culture and its promotion became “one of the most important and crucial functions of the Soviet State” (Zvorykin, 1970, p. 10). The government did not only set the cultural policy objectives, but also entirely controlled cultural production through public ownership of almost all cultural assets across the Union. Thus, the cultural infrastructure was almost entirely subsidized by the state and the cultural offering was also under the careful ideological scrutiny of the state (Jakobson et al., 2000, 2016).

Nevertheless, other forms of cultural participation existed such as amateur communities or clubs, which brought together nonprofessional painters, poets, and singers. Often these clubs would be affiliated with a public cultural organization and have access to the premises and other resources of this organization. Some of these associations could “be considered as embryonic forerunners of the independent nonprofit organizations” (Jakobson et al., 2000, p. 21) not only in Russia but also in many other post-socialist states including Kazakhstan (Nezhina & Ibrayeva, 2013).

However, it would be wrong to assume that the cultural administration in the Soviet Union was uniform. Instead, it was a trajectory that was constantly changing, evolving, and adapting. Historians tend to agree, for instance, that at the beginning the state’s control over cultural form and content was significantly less intense than in the later years (Fitzpatrick, 1976; Kay, 1983; Rindzevičiūtė, 2008). The late Stalin period is perhaps the time when the culture was under the most vigilant control (Fitzpatrick, 1976). According to Hillman Chartrand and McCaughey’s (1989), the Soviet government started off in the role of *Architect* in its mode of supporting the arts and culture. While subsidizing most of its cultural institutions and bureaucratizing the operations of the cultural sector, the state gave some degree of autonomy to the artists who could experiment and make their own creative choices. Eventually, the role changed to *Engineer* (Hillman Chartrand & McCaughey, 1989) and culture became completely subservient to political objectives under Stalin’s administration. Gradually all artistic activity was centralized and homogenized under the style of socialist realism, delimited by the standards of classical academic art (Nauruzbayeva, 2011a).

Constantly striving for increased rationalization, the mechanism of governing culture in the USSR, at least in theory, was always meant to be logical, centralized, and hierarchical. While the Communist party was in power (Fitzpatrick, 1976), the producers of culture such as artists and other cultural workers were at the bottom of this hierarchy (Rindzevičiūtė, 2008). Creative workers [*tvorcheskie rabotniki*] produced art for the people and in return the state provided them with everything they might need from commissions and art supplies to studios and apartments (Nauruzbayeva, 2011b). In 1953, the process of centralizing cultural governance reached its climax with the establishment of the All-Union Ministry of Culture and individual Union Republics (including Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic, Kazakh SSR) were placed somewhere in the middle tier of this hierarchy. Cultural ministries managed the work of cultural organizations in their respective republics and were subordinated to various All-Union and republic authorities (Zvorykin, 1970).

By the end of the Soviet era in Kazakh SSR, there were 40 professional theaters, 96 museums, 9,701 libraries, 1,531 cinema units and 25 concert venues that were operated by 21,007 cultural workers (Republican Information-Publishing Center, 1991). Before 1997, Almaty (then Alma-Ata) was the political as well as cultural capital of the country. Thus, most cultural and artistic endeavors concentrated in Almaty. Astana, on the other hand, remained outside major urban and cultural developments, with the exception of a period starting in the mid-1950s when Nikita Khrushchev initiated the Virgin Lands Campaign that aimed to transform the northern part of Kazakhstan into a major agricultural district of the Soviet Union. In 1961, to mark this transformation, the city was renamed Tselinograd (*tselina* meaning virgin soil) (Koch, 2012). The period of the campaign was the time when Astana developed most of its

infrastructure that later would make it the most attractive city across the entire central and northern regions of the country to become the new capital.

Here it is also important to stress the significance of many other historical events that have uniquely impacted the development of the arts and cities in Kazakhstan. For instance, World War II had rather beneficial effects on the development of filmmaking in Kazakhstan as the equipment and staff of two leading Soviet film studios (i.e. Mosfilm and Lenfilm) were evacuated to the capital (Almaty) to keep the Soviet film industry going while Russia was at the front line (Beumers, 2007). The establishment of a major Gulag labor camp—Karlag (Karaganda Corrective Labor Camp)—in central Kazakhstan is also believed to have significant impacts on the subsequent urban and artistic development of the country as many members of creative and scientific intelligentsia were unfairly imprisoned at the camp along with actual criminals (see Barnes, 2011; Bekturov, 1997; Mogilnitsky, 1993; Popov, 2012, etc.).

National independence and cultural policy

The dissolution of the USSR and Kazakhstan's resultant independence in 1991 was followed by a challenging period for the young sovereign state with major economic and political transitions. Because the government was preoccupied with issues associated with the state's newly established independence and its transition from communism to a market economy, culture predominantly remained outside the state's official agenda until recently. At the time, cultural affairs were placed out of the spotlight, labeled as "not a priority." Hence, the Kazakhstan cultural policy was in a state of quasi hibernation until 2014, when the Ministry of Culture and Sport (MCS) released a whitepaper outlining the new agenda—The Concept of Cultural Policy (CCP) in the Republic of Kazakhstan (Ministry of Culture and Sport, 2014)—and the topics of culture and creativity started making frequent appearances in local media channels.

Of course, this does not mean that cultural policy was absent. The government applied a lot of effort beginning in the early 1990s to transform the artistic and cultural landscape by distancing themselves from the Soviet past (Abazov & Khazbulatov, 2015). Instead of having an umbrella policy, law, or special government body to guide cultural change, it assigned different ministries and government agencies to address culture and art-related issues as they arose (Abazov & Khazbulatov, 2015). One such issue was nation-building. Like many other post-Soviet states Kazakhstan had to deconstruct its Soviet identity and build one of its own in the new context of independence. However, unlike other post-Soviet countries that found themselves in similar situations, Kazakhstan's case was particularly challenging (Matuszkiewicz, 2010). By the end of the Soviet regime, Kazakhstan became a multi-ethnic but also a very "russified" state where the titular (Kazakh) group did not represent the majority of the population (Matuszkiewicz, 2010). Northern parts of Kazakhstan had particularly uneven ratios of Kazakh to Russian population. As a result, Kazakh language was also not widely spoken. Such circumstances quite naturally led the state "endorsing ethnically based concept of the nation" (Dave, 2004, p. 129). In fact, the turn to ethnonationalism in its pursuit of state and nation formation was a widespread choice among other post-Soviet states. Brubaker (1996, pp. 4–5) labeled this trend as post-communist "nationalizing

nationalism.” In the context of Kazakhstan these processes have been often referred to as *Kazakhization* (Matuszkiewicz, 2010; Smagulova, 2008), or *Kazakhification* (Koch, 2012; Sarsembayev, 1999). These tendencies can be more clearly witnessed in the state’s efforts to popularize the Kazakh language, which have been addressed by relatively ample research (Dave, 1996; Matuszkiewicz, 2010).

After reviewing the content of the aforementioned white paper in 2014, it becomes apparent that the state changed its attitude toward arts and culture. If prior to 2014, the sector was mainly utilized for the ideological purposes, since then it was also seen as an additional driver of the economy. This new preoccupation with the economic prospects of art and culture is understandable and likely to have been stimulated by the international policy initiatives and argument for the use of culture and creativity as drivers for economic growth and development (UNDP & UNESCO, 2013). Consequently, in 2015, in line with the CCP white paper, to improve the management system, an amendment was made to the law “On Culture” demanding to set up seven advisory bodies “artistic councils” under the MCS structure for individual creative and cultural fields, namely theater, music and concert activities, circus art, museum and archeology, visual arts, architecture and design, literature and book publishing. The main purpose of the councils, as outlined by the CCP, was to systematize repertoire, cadres and touring practices of Kazakhstani cultural and creative institutions.

In Kazakhstan, previously public cultural and creative institutions were either subordinated directly to the MCS or to regional administrative bodies such as Departments of Culture of local *Akimats* (Kazakhstan’s equivalent of city halls). The new introduction of artistic councils in 2015 has the potential to introduce a type of “arm’s length principle” in governing cultural and creative affairs. Given the then significant historical and contemporary involvement of the state—represented by different state agencies of various levels but also by the direct intervention of individual politicians and bureaucrats—into the creative process, this seemed like a necessary measure to bring Kazakh cultural policy up to speed with international practice. Although evaluating the impact and effectiveness of these changes and the introduction of the councils is beyond the scope of this paper, these changes are connected with other policy shifts which we aim to address. In fact, those changes had followed another major urban and cultural policy shift. That is in December 1997, the Republic of Kazakhstan officially announced that the city of Astana (that was then known as Akmola and in 2019 renamed Nur-Sultan) would replace Almaty as its capital city.

As we highlighted previously, the case of Kazakhstan, is not only interesting because of its cultural policy development from Soviet to post-Soviet (as we will discuss in the next paragraph) but also because it allows us to analyze the complex interaction of cultural policy from national to urban and local across two cities, affected in different ways by the national policy decisions. Furthermore, we argue that unlike other post-Soviet nations that could re-discover their pre-Soviet identity with previous urban histories, Kazakhstan had to shape its future from a previously nomadic culture to a new urban culture. This provides a very rich context to contrast emerging dynamics between top-down interventions and bottom-up responses.

Methodology

The movement of the national capital city in Kazakhstan presents a unique opportunity to trace and compare the subsequent developmental trajectories of arts and culture in the two cities. Consequently, this research enquiry takes a form of a comparative case study (Bryman, 2012). Within each case, we identify four overlapping units of analysis—policy, place, people, and organizations. The core of the study is based on data collected during two extended field trips to both locations throughout the autumn 2016 and summer 2017. The first trip commenced with in-depth desk research. First, this allowed the researchers to grasp the distinctive developmental trajectories of the urban landscapes of Almaty and Astana. Secondly, it enabled us to qualitatively map the (public) cultural infrastructures in the two cities. The results are summarized in [Figure 3](#)². Thirdly, it highlighted the distinctive nature of cultural governance in relation to each city. As a result, a wide range of relevant materials (both primary and secondary) were analyzed, ranging from city guides, governmental websites, and other digital and published sources to key policy documents, national and local government reports, and official statistics. The results of the mapping exercise are far from comprehensive and could be suffering from omissions and inaccuracy. Due to the abundance of cultural institutions in Almaty and Astana, as well as the fast-paced nature of the cultural sector (especially the private creative and cultural sectors), it is nearly impossible to provide a conclusive representation of the creative and cultural infrastructures of the two cities. Nonetheless, mapping the major public creative and cultural institutions sheds light on the institutionalized creative and cultural assets present in Almaty and Astana. As indicated previously, there was a significant inflow of cultural assets (mostly in the form of institutions, as well as cultural objects such as paintings, rare books, etc.) to Astana, which was evidently triggered by the allocation of the capital status to the city in 1997. In terms of understanding cultural policy, one document was of primary interest to us—the Concept of Cultural Policy (Ministry of Culture and Sport, 2014). It is the first official document to streamline the country’s cultural policy since becoming an independent state. The desk research also provided us with necessary background information to effectively proceed with the second stage of the data collection—qualitative interviews with cultural policy-makers and practitioners.

² Detailed data represented in [Figure 3](#) are available from the corresponding author, Sana Kim, upon request.

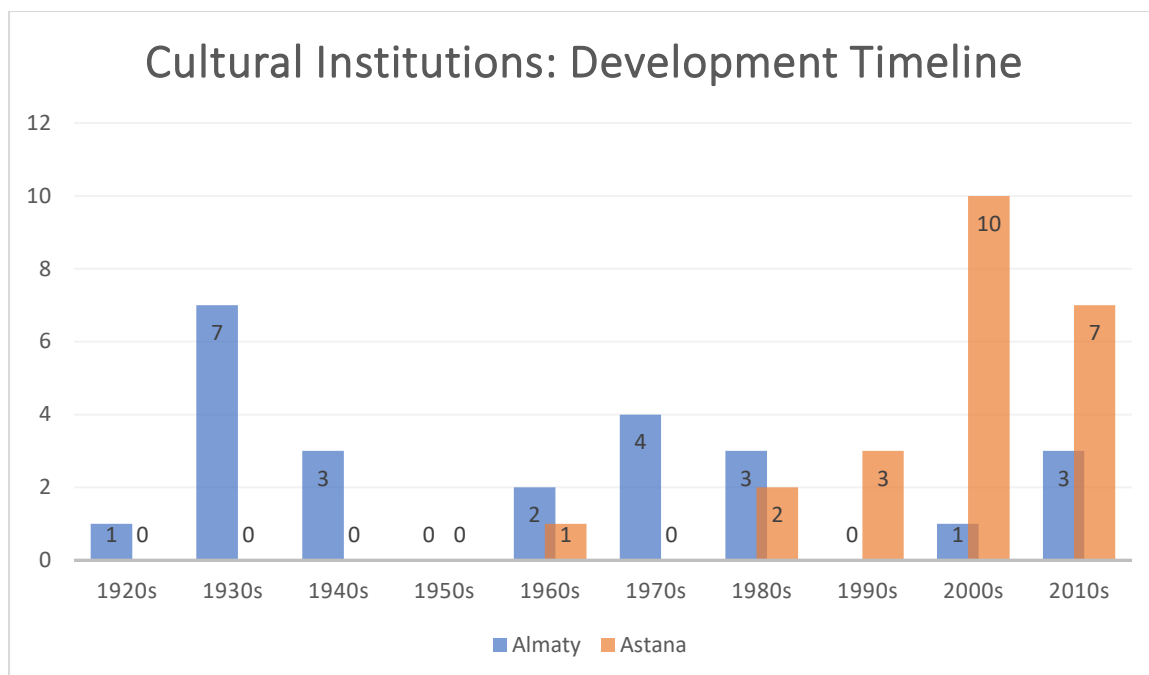


Figure 3. Public cultural institutions in Almaty and Astana by decade of foundation.³

Overall, we conducted 48 face-to-face interviewees, 25 in Almaty and 23 in Astana. These include interviews with cultural policymakers both at regional and national levels as well as cultural practitioners. Some of the interviewees were also affiliated with different higher education institutions as lecturers in various arts and cultural disciplines, which enabled them to provide a broader overview of the context and development of their respective sectors as well as involved in policy via working groups. Stratified purposive sampling (Patton, 1990) proved to be the most appropriate technique for this largely qualitative inquiry. Thus, in order to identify sectors and jobs to include in the sample, we adopted the UNCTAD classification of the creative industries, which divides them into four groups: Heritage, Art, Media and Functional Creations (UNDP & UNCTAD, 2010). Within these groups, we also differentiated between public, commercial, and nonprofits/informal domains of culture. Then, we selected specific individuals and organizations using various business directories (similar to Yell.com), social media (i.e. Facebook) as well as our qualitative mapping and personal networks. We applied thematic analysis to identify commonalities in the accounts of the interviewees (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Interviews were complemented with ethnographic observations (Herbert, 2000) of multiple visits to cultural organizations and specific events in two locations. Since the intention here is to focus specifically on the role of cultural policy, for this paper we draw more from our findings gathered via desk research and the policy-related discussion of our interviews.

³ One important institution within Astana's public cultural infrastructure—the State Academic Russian Drama Theater named after M. Gorky—is not represented in the data behind this figure as it was founded in the end of the 19th century in 1899, which is beyond the figure's scope.

Scale, policy and urban cultural development: Lessons from Astana and Almaty

In the discussion, we focus specifically on the role of policy in the development and shaping of arts and the city in relation to the two cities under investigation. In our findings, we identify three levels via which policy can engage and shape the nature and opportunities for arts and the city from the macro (international/national) to the meso (regional/urban) to the micro-level of activities (inter- actions with arts organizations and practitioners). We articulate the discussion under the following three headings:

1. Macro changes shaping arts and city relations. Amongst these macro changes we specifically focus on the rejection of the post-Soviet legacy and on the nation-building processes of *Kazakhisation* and ideas of *Eurasianism*, which resulted in the relocation of the capital city;
2. Urban (meso-level) changes and their impact on local arts organizations and their work. Here we reflect specifically on the way local policies and development have resulted in Astana becoming more the place for institutional culture and representation, while Almaty has acquired more freedom;
3. Impact on individual organizations and actors (micro-level). Here we look specifically at how local policymakers shape the work of local arts organization and the response of cultural producers trying to balance spaces of dependence and spaces of engagement (Cox, 1998).

Macro-policy changes shaping arts in (capital) cities

The movement of the capital city from the culturally and otherwise vibrant, Almaty to the then provincial town of Astana is obviously an enactment of top-down policymaking, a policy that was conceived at the very top of the national hierarchy. In fact, this major geopolitical decision can be directly attributed to a single person, namely the autocratic now former president of Kazakhstan of almost 30 years, Nursultan Nazarbayev, who quite explicitly takes credit for it in his speeches and books. In his book *Kazakhstanskii put* (The Kazakhstan Way) he recalls: “The idea of moving and building a new capital city emerged a long time ago, back in 1992, but then I did not dare to speak about it, because the economy of Kazakhstan did not allow to realize this plan” (Nazarbayev, 2006, p. 335).

The president justified this decision with several sensible reasons mentioning Almaty’s unfavorable location in an earthquake-prone zone, that it was also too close to external borders, its insufficient space for expansion, environmental issues, and the relative depopulation of the Northern Kazakhstan (Nazarbayev, 2006). Whilst other destinations (i.e. Karaganda, Ulytau, Zhezkazgan, and Aktyubinsk) were considered for the role of capital, in comparison to other cities in question, Astana (then Akmola) already had a solid infrastructure for utilities supply, administration, and transportation (Nazarbayev, 2006). In addition to these practical reasons Nazarbayev (2006) also always highlighted the more complex reasoning behind this decision:

At the new stage of the country's development, the new capital was to become not only the main city of the country, uniting the Kazakhstan's nation [*Kazakhstanskuyu naciyu*]. The capital was supposed to ensure lively economic activity and, in the future, become one of the economic megalopolises of Eurasia. (p. 337)

Academics have been quick to pick up on this and draw parallels between the creation of the new capital with an attempt to construct a new image for the now independent Kazakh nation and a nation-building exercise (Anacker, 2004; Koch, 2012; Wolfel, 2002). Indeed, in his Nazarbayev (2006, 2010) consistently stresses similar geopolitical motivations behind the capital relocation. He writes: "I was certain that the movement of the capital city would play a big role in validating Kazakhstan as an independent state" (Nazarbayev, 2010, p. 25). The president quite openly speaks of Astana as "the symbol of renewal of Kazakhstan, symbol of inexhaustible constructive energy of its multinational people" (Nazarbayev, 2010, p. 21). He is also persistent in emphasizing the city's centrality. However, the rhetoric is that Astana is not only located in the center of Kazakhstan, but also right in-between the two continents—Europe and Asia. This places it right, "*In the Heart of Eurasia*," which is the title of Nazarbayev's (2010) book about Astana.

Generally, as we previously argued, within the state's nation-building agenda there is a clear orientation toward re-embracing and popularizing the ethnically based national identity and culture. Trends of the so-called *Kazakhization* are evident in the demographic trends that are characterized by an out-migration of Russians, Germans, and other ethnicities and in-migration of ethnic-Kazakhs; in political life with marginalization of politicians with "pro-Russian or Sovietized/Russified standpoint" (Sarsembayev, 1999, p. 333) and with the state's efforts to popularize the Kazakh language (Dave, 2007; Matuszkiewicz, 2010).

Almaty, as the capital city inherited from the Soviet Union, can be read as a symbol of oppression, which was placed rather uncomfortably within this nation-building orientation. While being the most developed city of Kazakhstan, after gaining independence Almaty was also "a typical colonial capital" established and run by Russians (who occupied senior administrative positions) for many years (Anacker, 2004, p. 517). Everything in its cityscape transcended its colonial and Soviet heritage from the street names to architecture from which the state wanted to disconnect. Hence, it proved practical to start the capital city construction anew. In addition to discontinuing the Soviet legacy by setting the course toward *Kazakhization*, the state's nation-building initiative also employs the idea of *Eurasianism*. Internationally the ideology of *Eurasianism* aims to integrate Kazakhstan into the international community as part of both Europe and Asia and perhaps even brand it as a gateway between the two continents, while domestically it aims to tackle the division between nationalities by legitimizing the ethnic minorities of the Slavic descent (Bekus, 2017).

Urban cultural development in Almaty and Astana

The sudden relocation of capital city represented a shock. Almaty was and is still widely regarded as the cultural center of Kazakhstan by nationals as well as foreigners and usually referred to as the "cultural capital" of the country (Aitken, 2012). Throughout the period of

nearly 70 years, Almaty enjoyed the status of the main city and accumulated a great deal of cultural assets such as cultural objects, institutions, and skilled labor. Being the largest city in Kazakhstan with a population of 1.863 million (CIA, 2019), it has been estimated that in 2012 Almaty accommodated around 19 theaters, 20 museums, 34 libraries, 18 cinema theaters, 27 concert venues, 1 circus, 14 art galleries, and 4 orchestras (Aitken, 2012). This is significantly more than in any other urban area in Kazakhstan including Astana to this day. Astana, on the other hand, has had quite a different history; it was a small provincial city and remained outside the major urban as well as cultural and artistic developments until the late 1990s (Wight, 2014). Since the early 1990s, Astana's cityscape has probably transformed more rapidly than any other post-Soviet city (Anacker, 2004). Astana's demographic changes have been equally as dramatic. The city's population increased from 276,000 in 1999 to today's estimate of 1.118 million (CIA, 2019). The 1990s and following decades saw a sharp increase in the number of cultural institutions and venues founded in Astana (see Figure 3). All of the country's ministries and governmental offices, including those in charge of cultural affairs, were also relocated to Astana.

The government subsidies for cultural and artistic affairs that were once the privilege of the former capital city were redirected to the new capital to keep all the new institutes of culture and creativity going. In 2012, the Kazakh government spent at least three times more to support arts and culture in its new capital in comparison to the old one (Ministry of Culture and Sport, 2012). It has been estimated that by 2014 Astana had acquired 7 theaters, 8 museums, 27 libraries, 7 cinema theaters, 8 concert venues, 1 circus, 8 art galleries, and 4 orchestras (Zhumaseitova, 2014). As mentioned by many interviewees, despite losing the capital title Almaty is still considered by many the cultural capital of Kazakhstan. The foreign commentator Aitken (2012, p. 98) describes it as "a cornucopia of cultural events, facilities, composers, writers, performers, teaching academies and creative endeavours."

The major cultural institutions in Almaty are clustered in the old city center (in the city's northeast). Although the city has been gradually expanding and the city center has been spreading in the southwest direction, the cultural scene seems to remain in the old center. Only the national film studio (*Kazakhfilm*) and the Russian State Academic Theater for Children and Youth named after N. Sats are on the outskirts. According to the website for the Department of Culture of Almaty, there are as many as 225 cultural institutions in the city, of which 134 are owned by the state (Department of Culture of Almaty, 2015). Furthermore, some of the oldest, largest, and most well-known institutions that directly prepare creative workers (such as painters, actors, film directors, choreographers, dancers, musicians, etc.) are located in the city. While conducting the mapping exercise it was observed that many of Astana's cultural institutions (especially museums and galleries, as well as performance and exhibition venues) are clustered in the city's newly constructed signature buildings (such as the Palace of Peace and Reconciliation or the Palace of Independence). This occurrence may be a result of the centrally planned nature of the city.

Despite the shift in policy, funding, and infrastructure, many highlighted the impossibility to change the path of cultural development of Almaty. Almaty was described as possessing some sort of unique urban atmosphere that sharply distinguishes it from any other city in Kazakhstan, especially when it comes to culture [*kul'tura*] and creativity [*tvorchestvo*]. As a former head of the city's cultural department in Almaty expressed:

I think Alma-Ata is a special city. Traditionally, all of our elite, all our art is here. Here, traditionally, is all the creative generation/creation, everything is generating and seethes from here. It was and will be for another 1,000 years ahead. (Government official 1, Almaty)

In fact, the theme of Almaty's distinctive "cultural atmosphere" was one of the strongest among interviewees based both in Almaty and Astana.

On the other hand, over the past two decades, the cultural life of Astana has been largely orchestrated by the government. Accounts from interviewees highlight the significance of major official events particularly celebrations around the day of the capital city and EXPO 2017 for the local art and cultural scene. These events usually include extensive cultural programs. One respondent from Astana described the annual celebration of the day of the capital as "an apotheosis of culture and art" (Public museum worker, Astana), which summarizes the popular perception of this event and its relationship with Astana's artistic and cultural life. Artists and creative workers gravitate to Astana from all over the country to participate in the numerous events or help with the organization of such events. Therefore, the arts and cultural development seems to be of episodic nature from one major event to another as this art advisor working in Astana highlighted:

The city has grown very much. After EXPO, I think. It was a little quite in here [after EXPO ended]. Since September there has been a lull and now everyone is waiting for the opening of the EXPO [buildings] at the mean time everything is calm. (Art advisor and manager, Astana)

However, with the capital status, Almaty lost some of its significance in the eyes of cultural policymakers at the national level and this local cultural policymaker in Almaty expressed concerns about how the move of the capital affected Almaty: "I think the ministry of culture is making a big mistake today by equating Almaty to the other cities of Kazakhstan. Almaty is a special city!" (Government official 1, Almaty).

Micro-developments and creative opportunities for re-balancing dependence and engagement

The impact of the capital move created ripples of change not only in the urban cultural infrastructure and development but also in the work and engagement of cultural practitioners within the cities. In this respect, although less money is allocated to support Almaty's public cultural infrastructure, it emerged in the interviews that this shift has caused a change of attitude amongst local cultural producers. The views of cultural producers highlight the way the city is perceived as a space of dependence—where their work and interaction is often shaped by bigger top-down policy decisions—and local actors have to accept and interact with those changes in their everyday life. As this policymaker in Almaty cultural department highlighted producers had to adapt:

An interesting thing happened, I'm even very glad that the capital was moved from Alma-Ata to Astana, because there is such a thing called the 'curse of resources' ... It is transferable to the sphere of culture ... And again, the lack of resources motivates people to start moving. That is, how do I look for other sources of financing for existence? How can I

find other possible support models? Partnerships? People began to move a little. I think that this happened just after all these official things moved. (Government official 2, Almaty)

Furthermore, other respondents acknowledged that the decrease in funding was also accompanied by a decrease in censorship. Artists and cultural workers reported having more creative freedom after Almaty lost its status as the capital. As an Almaty-based musician highlights “Well, as free artists we don’t care [that Almaty is no longer the capital]. We even like it more this way because now there is less fuss here, fewer officials and we live calmly and create” (Musician, Almaty). Another musician and music teacher summarized “There used to be more administrative issues before [the capital relocation]. Now it is more relaxed here” (Musician and educator, Almaty). Compared with the previous official status of Almaty, with the implied official scrutiny and political responsibilities, others highlighted that this resulted in greater freedom for producers, including this independent theater producer “When you are the creative capital or the cultural capital of the country, then there is a little less politics, but more freedom” (Founder of an independent theater and actress, Almaty). We can read here how producers have adapted to the new nature of their city and space of dependence. Despite the shift in policy, funding, and infrastructure, many highlighted the impossibility to change the path of cultural development of Almaty. Having a long history of cultural development, after losing its capital status, the city was able to push through, keeping its unique “cultural atmosphere” without having to engage in policy and politics directly. On the other hand, interviewees in Astana acknowledged that the city has a very different look and feel, which certainly influences cultural and creative life. As a theater worker explains the capital status means the population have different aspirations—from being creative— but also that the high level of formality and codes do not facilitate informal behaviors:

Here [in Astana] the public sector strongly influences the mood of the population/society. People see themselves in an armchair of a national company, [...] That is why people do not aspire to go there [into the creative field] ... Actually, there are many of creative people, but most of them are engaged in advertising, employed by joint-stock companies or something similar. (Public theatre marketing and management specialist, Astana)

As an independent cultural events producer in Astana highlights, the city feels more constrained, even in the way people dress—the level of professionalism and formality—which might impact on their possibility to secure access to funding and spaces in the city. They comment “in Almaty, it is easier to manifest your creativity. In Almaty people are freer, they even earn by being creative and different. Here they don’t even let you inside the Akimat [city hall] wearing sneakers” (Independent theater events manager and a contemporary artist, Astana).

Furthermore, a cultural producer in the theater sector of Almaty highlighted the inability to engage in producing in Astana due to the high level of bureaucracy and barriers in trying to propose projects in the new capital.

We do not work with the state. Not on principle, but because we made several different attempts to find funding for projects and trips. There were refusals, but more often there we were bumping into some kind of bureaucracy with which you get tired of dealing, spending time, waiting, looking for you letters in the office, going there constantly and preparing

paperwork, which almost inevitably gets lost. So, we just stopped doing it. (Independent theatre director and actress, Almaty)

This account is very representative of how creative workers feel about interacting with the state and thus shows us the nature of the cultural products and experiences that end up on the market in Astana.

Although a slight change in dynamic between practitioners and policymakers is detectable in Almaty, where the former tries to engage with the latter and bring about change from the bottom up. This reflects what Cox (1998) articulates as the need for cultural producers to create spaces of engagement to support and expand their work in their space of engagement within cities with very defined structures and bureaucracies. As the producer of an independent art festival in Almaty explains:

Many private initiatives try to progress in parallel with the state and not have any dialogues with it. I believe that this is wrong ... if there will be segregation then nothing will change. If we do not interact, we will live in parallel worlds and someday this artificial situation will explore ... we must set up a dialogue. Usually, we meet on large official events. We [representatives of the independent sphere] stick together, and interaction is difficult. The most horrible was a town-planning forum. ... The aksakals [refers to the male elders, used rather sarcastically] were sitting down, but on the other hand they gave us a chance to talk. ... But anyway, this is some kind of a step. If we do not do this, we have no right to say that the state does not support us. (Independent art festival director, Almaty)

Therefore, while cultural producers might seek spaces of engagement across the two cities—with producers in Almaty seeking more support for the now left-behind city and producers in Astana seeking cultural recognition beyond the state within the sector—the opportunities for these engagements are very few. While there are attempts to create a dialogue between the two entities, communication remains rather challenging; one respondent metaphorically described the current lack in communication as the situation where “the left hand does not know what the right one does” (Museum worker and historian, Almaty). One hand being cultural organizations and practitioners and the other policymakers and bureaucrats.

Conclusions

The paper contributes to the broader agenda of gaining a better understanding of the relationship between arts and the city. We acknowledge that while an extensive range of case studies and research have explored the Western context and the emerging East-Asia landscape, very little knowledge is currently available about the post-Soviet context, particularly in relation to post-Soviet countries in Central Asia. We highlight how these countries and cities represent an interesting perspective into the relationship between arts and the city as they had to re-position themselves politically and culturally after the collapse of the Soviet Union, finding themselves reinventing local cultures and national identities while critically engaging with the Soviet legacy and its impact on culture and urban development. Furthermore, in the case of cities in Kazakhstan and other neighboring countries, new

alliances and international repositioning as nodes of a new *Eurasian* culture and way of life has emerged as a new pathway for urban cultural development.

The case study of Kazakhstan and its former (Almaty) and current (Astana) capital city allows for broader reflection on the importance of looking at multiple geographical scales when researching arts and the city. We emphasize that—possibly influenced by neoliberalism and new urban entrepreneurial dynamics in Western and Asian cities with few notable exceptions in relation to policy mobility across scales (Borén et al., 2020; Varró & Bunders, 2019)—the current perspectives on arts and the city does not seem to acknowledge enough the role of macro-policy development at the national level within the city-level analysis. The paper pushes forward the arguments of Borén and Young (2016) about the importance in looking at arts and the city with a focus “on the role of path dependencies within the post-socialist areas (such as academic traditions and practices) and to give due emphasis to agency within the region and how these interact with (but are not determined by) global processes of neoliberalizing academia” (p. 590).

Using Almaty and Astana comparatively we acknowledge that to understand the two cities urban cultural development it is important to look at the influence of macropolicy changes on the city level as well as the cultural producers and their work in the cities. National policy development—in the field of culture or beyond it—can cause shocks and disruption to urban cultural development and top-down policy initiatives shape cities with the extreme example in Kazakhstan of the capital relocation from Almaty to Astana.

Finally, we conclude by reflecting on the importance of using a complexity perspective in understanding the role of arts in the city. Within this perspective the researcher is invited to offer insights into the interaction between top-down policy interventions and urban cultural ecologies. In Kazakhstan for a very long period of time, the state had been uniquely in charge of culture. The predicted path for many governmental officials (the majority of whom were born, raised, and educated in the Soviet Union) still tends to lean toward following an outdated path of seeing culture simply as a nationalistic exercise. Investing in institutions and attracting large-scale events has been an easy path to follow in this respect; however, more challenging and important is to consider how “micro dynamics among creative industries and other agents at the local level become key to the understanding of the development of the creative cities” (Comunian, 2011, p. 1164). Change is now long needed and might allow culture to play a stronger role in the future of Kazakhstan’s cities.

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