

## THE EU'S KAZAKHSTAN: BETWEEN YURT AND PIPELINE

The nomination of the Governor of Alaska to a vice-presidential candidacy of a major US political party has brought The Frontier to many people's attention again, and into a period of questioning as well. Dictionary definitions stress geographic solidity and settlement, a border or boundary that demarcates a well-defined space that is recognizable on any readily available map.

American social historian Frederick Jackson Turner might not have agreed. His late 19<sup>th</sup> century contribution pointed to the existence of a more fluid, shifting frontier landscape located somewhere between the outermost point of civilization and the wilderness. (1) It was within this landscape that Europeans and their descendants confronted previously unknown conditions of nature, turbulent weather systems, and indigenous peoples, and having coped with these and survived, shed older identities to craft particularly American traits. Individualism and entrepreneurialism, and an anticipation of a rewarding future, were three of these, as were a belief in egalitarianism, self-help, and a most wary view of imposing principles of centralized government on a people content with reaching decisions locally, and all on their own.

Turner's inspiring thesis left out a great deal that might also have been behind the formation of a national identity specific to the New World. Minorities, and those who found scant success on the frontier, were not included in the process. Nor were the millions of immigrants whose frontier was defined less by the challenges of moving through a civilization - wilderness pathway than by a welcome yet disruptive relocation from poor, rural southern and eastern European villages to crowded urban tenements. Despite criticisms, however, the aura surrounding the frontier hypothesis has continued to occupy a significant place in presidential and vice-presidential politics that transcends gender and that of a current gun-toting candidate.

President Ronald Reagan, himself a product of a childhood lived over a series of stores in small town Illinois before his eventual move to a California suburb, was nonetheless fond of using a frontier image of Americans, their hard-work, self-reliance, entrepreneurial skills, and risk-taking behaviors, to support a philosophy of deregulation, a free market economy, and limited federal intervention. As a consequence, The Frontier took on several new aspects, being no longer a specific yet fluid dividing line in the western or most northern part of the nation, but rather a national brand of which many were supposedly representative, or as Reagan once put it, a place where "someone can always get rich." (2)

The seemingly staid borders of Europe have continually been shifted, and shifted back again, by transnational conflicts and their entanglements, though a personal confrontation with a natural wilderness has been significantly diminished by over two thousand years of the spread of agriculture. Nevertheless, an horizon of political and ideological frontiers appears to be growing due to independent movements along ethnic and linguistic lines, the foundation of regional councils, and the outreach of the European Union as it attempts to absorb additional members in an eastward expansion. Just how to define today's Europe –should we now include Turkey or even Russia? – is a subject discussed by prominent travel writers accustomed to introducing and reintroducing readers to the more familiar contours of the European west. (3) Observers of the armchair variety may also be perplexed with discussions of, and military actions within another Frontier, that of the sphere of influence, which

is often defined in historical rather than in contemporary terms and comes replete with international entanglements of its own.

Energy needs have brought the EU into a consideration of what seem still more geopolitical outposts, namely those of Central Asia, whose vast mineral and oil and gas wealth remains only partially tapped. Kazakhstan, for example, once part of the Soviet Empire, is as much sought after by the EU as it is by Russia, given its large Russian-speaking population. Some believe it to be Turkic and remain anxious about the future because of their country's former inclusion in the Ottoman Empire. Perhaps appropriately, it takes a travel writer, Christopher Robbins, to introduce us to this still far off country, and to sort out the complexities inherent in a land whose name most people have heard of, but who actually know very little about it at all. (4)

When viewed in macroscopic perspective, the " Wild East" is a nation larger than western Europe or the US state of Texas, and still noted for its steppe, nomads, ranging wolf populations, and blistering winters. A closer view would yield a portrait of a nation under Soviet domination until the early 1990's, a time when 90% of the fruits of heavy industry and agriculture left the country on centralized routes to Moscow from which they were redistributed in such a way that many questioned why their nation's natural wealth had made so few wealthy at home and so many abroad rich. Even Kazakhstan's minerals were refined elsewhere, and Caspian fishing communities managed to harvest prized sturgeon for their eggs for eager foreign customers while finding staples at home in ever shorter supply.

Economic change began in 1978 when an oilfield was discovered thus leading the country slowly away from lengthy days spent at metal blast furnaces and nights housed in the cement block residences of the Soviet era. This more modern route forward did not see the end to an authoritarian state, but rather was punctuated by the discovery of additional oilfields and the in-migration of a host of western oil companies that drew on local labor and made many a great deal wealthier than before. The discovery of oil and its petro-dollar dispersions were quickly followed by visiting diplomats in search of pipeline agreements. The EU and the US figured prominently here, as did neighboring Russia and China, and later, oil-producing Iran itself. If economic and political nationhood was acquired during this time, so was the "Dutch Disease," a situation in which the inflow of capital is not met by a concurrent capacity to absorb. Exports plunged precipitously, inflation rose steeply, and fledgling small businesses, both attached and unattached to the oil industry, collapsed.

A more microscopic view yields a profile of attempts to blend the old and the new on a flexible, privatizing frontier as it recovers, apparently successfully, from its more despairing days of effort followed by decline. Lounging camels stand across the dusty streets from dysfunctional ATM machines, newly-founded banks, and taxi stands, while a whole city that is based on oil production, Atyrau, has been dubbed the "New Houston." Questions of national identity are still in flux as well. Some fondly remember Alexander Solzhenitsyn. His exile in Kazakhstan where he wrote of his captivity in the Gulag was followed by a period of living in their country in a one room thatched hut, and the teaching of mathematics to the young. More than a few, however, look askance at his later preference -- that their country follow its part-Russian heart, bend borders again, and become reunited with its neighbor. The young themselves hardly recognize his name and are of a decidedly nationalistic

bent, ready to join with a rising entrepreneurial spirit while continuing to drink mare's milk on occasion, and Russian peppered vodka on another.

Although one may inquire as to how this seeming frontier reality exists within an authoritarian government, answers may be found in developing social and economic energies that continually flow from without towards an expectant public already familiar with the result of others' origins and frontier experiences. One entrepreneur, drawing on China's absorption into the Mongol Empire, hopes to provide even the unemployed with a paradise in the midst of their country's wind-blown streets and snow storms. Planned with a huge tent-like architecture in mind, it is conceived as a modern-day palace of Genghis Khan, except that it will contain palm trees, beaches, boats, and a golf course. Never mind that the Khan's historic court lay 170 miles from Beijing in China, or that it is possible that many will not be able to afford entry. The American version of The Frontier has always stressed anticipation rather than inclusiveness. Perhaps because of a similar mythos, no Pleasure Dome has as yet been built in Kazakhstan; at least not yet.

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(1) Kluger, Richard. *Seizing Destiny: How America Grew From Sea To Shining Sea*. New York, Alfred A. Knopf. (2007)

(2) Wilentz, Sean. *The Age Of Reagan: A History, 1974-2008*. New York, HarperCollins Publishers. (2008)

(3) Gross, Matt. *Lessons From A Frugal Traveler*. New York Times Online (9/5/2008)

(4) Robins, Christopher. *Apples Are From Kazakhstan: The Land That Disappeared*. New York, Atlas and Company.