

**CAUSE WITHOUT A REBEL:  
Kazakhstan's Unionist Nationalism and  
Theories of Secessionism and Post-Secession Foreign Policy**

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**ABSTRACT:** Why would elites or masses in an ethnically distinct region ever opt for “alien rule” over national independence? Literature on secessionism and post-secession foreign policy, both primordialist and constructivist, typically posits “ethnic” explanations: groups accepting alien rule either lack sufficient national consciousness or face difficulties in mobilizing this consciousness. An opposing school reacts by denying ethnicity is anything more than a post-hoc rationale designed to disguise the real motives for secessionism: greed or political ambition. An alternative perspective, grounded in psychological research, argues that strong national consciousness does not necessarily entail separatism but is still an important part of the separatist equation. Specifically, separatism can be understood as one product of a commitment problem that is intensified by ethnic distinctions. But since separatism is only one way to address the commitment problem, even highly nationally conscious groups may advocate the preservation or creation of a union by addressing the commitment problem in other ways. The choice between “separatist nationalism” and “unionist nationalism” tends to involve political economy considerations. This is demonstrated through a detailed case study of Kazakhstan’s relationship to the USSR and Commonwealth of Independent States, a highly challenging case since its consistent unionism is almost universally attributed to “ethnic” factors: a lack of national consciousness and/or its large ethnic Russian population. The findings not only better account for Kazakhstan’s behavior, but also help explain puzzles related to the European Union and provide insight into how to solve and prevent ethnic conflict.

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