

# “Like a crooked mirror”: A Conversation with Irina Gumyrkina and Sergey Kim on Post-Soviet Kazakhstan

Edited by Nina Friess

◇ eSamizdat 2021 (XIV), pp. 211-217 ◇

**I**RINA Gumyrkina and Sergei Kim are the editors of the Kazakhstani literary journal “Daktil”<sup>1</sup>. Gumyrkina is a journalist and editor of the Poetry section. She is a graduate of the Open Literary School in Almaty and the studio of the Moscow publishing house STiKHI. Her poems have been published in Kazakhstani and Russian literary periodicals. She is the author of two books of poetry, *Skvoz' tmu i svet* (Almaty, 2020) and *Svoistvo veshchei* (Moscow, 2021). Her poems have won several Kazakhstani and international awards. Kim is the editor and co-creator of “Daktil”. He holds a master’s degree in Russian literature from the University of Tartu and another master’s degree in Russian studies from the University of Helsinki. He currently lives in Almaty, Kazakhstan. In this interview (July 2021), we talk with Kim and Gumyrkina about postcoloniality, the difficulties of the post-Soviet literary market and the development of Russophone literature in Kazakhstan.

\* \* \*

**Nina Friess** *How has the Kazakhstani cultural, social, and political context changed over the past thirty years since the fall of the USSR?*

**Sergei Kim** Here we have three very big questions combined into one. Speaking only about culture and literature, it seems to me that the 1990s were a time of transition, both in the political and in the cultural sphere. And looking at the last ten to fifteen years, the main trend seems to be a certain awareness of the western intellectual tradition by our Kazakhstani authors, artists, curators, and so on. First of all, we are witnessing a familiarisation with this tradition, including the academic tradition, and an attempt to engage in a dialogue, starting from postcolonial studies, getting to know them and trying to somehow integrate Kazakhstan into this narrative of postcoloniality, and eventually also with

feminist art, gender studies, etc. That, in my opinion, is the result of the last fifteen years and the main trend in the Kazakhstani art and literature in particular, at least in the Russian-speaking sphere.

**Irina Gumyrkina** For me it is a little difficult to talk about it; I can probably say more as a journalist. I have been in this field for almost sixteen years and a lot has changed over this time – society has changed, agendas and means of communication have changed. But I would say that young people have become more active now, and that there is a certain freedom of speech, even in literature. In other words, what was under censorship thirty years ago, what seemed shameful, wrong, etc., is now discussed quite freely, and with a certain understanding. For instance, feminine endings in job titles have become the standard in writing, and Fem Writing<sup>2</sup> in poetry has become not merely topical, but a way of talking about things we did not openly speak about a decade ago. When in today’s theatre you hear obscene, uncensored language from the stage, it does not make you feel uncomfortable, you understand that it’s the norm. Society has changed, values have changed, art has changed. Today, neither society nor the authorities will judge you for things like so-called ‘hot news poems’<sup>3</sup> or for an exhibition devoted to violence or the defence of human rights. In this respect, we have probably become freer.

**N.F.** *What new kinds of cultural relations have*

\* Translated from Russian by Martha Jurowski.

<sup>1</sup> See < [www.daktil.kz](http://www.daktil.kz) > (latest access: 19.11.2021).

<sup>2</sup> “Feministskoe pis'mo”, widely known as “Fempis'mo” (Фемписьмо) is a new trend in Russian literature that focuses on feminist writings, themes and authors.

<sup>3</sup> “Stikhi na zlobu dnia” (стихи «на злобу дня») is a very popular form of poetry that humorously and satirically addresses topical issues and current headlines.

*developed over the years, with regard to the Western cultural world as well as other national realities of the post-Soviet space?*

**S.K.** It is possible to say that Kazakhstani culture operates between two important poles: the Russian culture and Russia, and Western culture – that is, Western Europe, the United States, and so on. We are trying to establish some kind of contact with both of them, a dialogue of sorts. And this is what I was talking about in the previous answer: the intensity of contact with Western culture. It seems to me that it has started to increase in recent years, decades, maybe. Meanwhile the connection to Russia remains more or less on the same level and is based on the Soviet past, Kazakhstan and Russia’s common history. So, in that sense we are doing well!

*N.F. In your opinion, how are relations with the other Central Asian countries?*

**I.G.** I can use the example of our Open Literary School in Almaty (OLSchA)<sup>4</sup>, and before that the Musaget Foundation<sup>5</sup>, to illustrate this point: they did contribute a lot to the establishment of cultural and literary relations with Russia and with Uzbekistan. Before the pandemic, we held annual events with famous writers, critics, poets and editors of literary journals. They came to us from Russia and Uzbekistan. We even did a joint project: poets from Uzbekistan came and read poetry with Almaty poets on the stage of the theatre, there was also some improvisation, it was a very interesting project. Last year, because of the pandemic, OLSchA introduced

<sup>4</sup> The Open Literary School of Almaty has been operating since 2009, continuing the initiative and activities of the Musaget Foundation. The founders of the school were Almaty literary graduates of the Musaget master classes led by Mikhail Zemskov (<<https://litshkola.kz/o-shkole/>>, latest access: 19.11.2021).

<sup>5</sup> The Musaget Public Foundation for Culture and Humanities was a charitable organisation dedicated to the promotion and development of culture in Kazakhstan, particularly literature and the fine arts. Founded by the late writer, literary scholar and critic Olga Markova in 1993, the foundation had been one of the centres of cultural life in Almaty from the late 1990s to 2008. The Musaget initiated and carried out several successful literary projects in Kazakhstan, involving writers and literary scholars from Russia, England, France and the United States. In December 2008, with the death of its president Olga Markova, the foundation was closed.

online learning, and we had a poetry workshop led by Evgeny Abdullaev, a writer and literary critic from Tashkent. This year, in September, we are opening the first writer’s residency in Kazakhstan, together with the International Writing Program of the University of Iowa. I think we are doing really well in this respect and the Almaty literary school is doing a very good job.

*N.F. Is it possible to identify the cultural and social dynamics still associated with the legacy of the Soviet experience?*

**I.G.** I find it difficult to answer this question; it seems to me that even if the Soviet legacy has been preserved somewhere, it is already on its last legs.

**S.K.** On the whole I agree, but I feel that this hierarchical notion of art or culture, which stretches back to Soviet times, is still quite strong in Russia and Kazakhstan. Even the phenomenon of thick journals, which still exist – as a kind of institution of legitimisation for aspiring authors, where some authority figures, like gatekeepers, admit or refuse entry into the broader literary world. This too is an archaic phenomenon that probably does not have long to live, unfortunately – or maybe fortunately. And our journal can be regarded as an internet replica of a thick literary journal, and is therefore also a temporary phenomenon, which, perhaps not in the near future but in the long term, will cease to exist.

*N.F. How does the historical memory of the Soviet period, and the way in which it was promoted by the institutions, affect today’s social and perhaps cultural reality?*

**S.K.** I think that the Soviet experience is being reconsidered quite actively right now – the Holodomor is being examined, Zheltoksan<sup>6</sup> is being studied,

<sup>6</sup> *Zheltoksan*, also known as “December of 1986”, were protests that took place in Alma-Ata over the course of four days in response to General Secretary of Communist Party of USSR Mikhail Gorbachev’s dismissal of the ethnic Kazakh Dinmukhamed Kunayev, the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan. Predominantly young Kazakhs took to the streets of the capital

things that used to be taboo are being investigated. There are many such studies appearing now, including from the West. And there seems to be a greater interest in these topics here as well. So, it's something we are going to have to deal with a lot in both written texts and art in the near future.

*N.F. Could you say a few words about the significance of postcolonial discourse in Kazakhstan?*

*S.K.* It seems to be in vogue, a hot topic that a lot of people are interested in. Partly, I think, because more people are going to the West, to Western universities, where they are receiving an education and getting acquainted with certain traditions, from Edward Said to Madina Tlostanova. They consume these theoretical concepts and transfer them onto our literature, trying to generate some new ideas – there is more and more of this happening. Yes, it's interesting to follow and it's quite fashionable right now.

*N.F. And is Kazakhstan a postcolonial country in your opinion?*

*S.K.* That is a big question, the subject of academic debate: was the Soviet past a colonial past? Was the Soviet Union an empire or not? Well, it is hardly possible to give a definite answer. In some cases, it is probably acceptable to consider our experience a colonial one.

*I.G.* I will add that, as far as literature is concerned, we are still dependent on Russia – in other words, we are still dependent on those thick literary journals, because we in Kazakhstan have a big problem with that. We have a problem with progress, with our ability to make an impact, and our authors strive to join Russia's literary community, which

functions as a starting point from which they hope to move on. If they have attracted attention in Russia, it means they will be noticed elsewhere. And consequently, being published in literary journals is a very important point in their creative biography. That is really not good, because this dependence does not allow us to develop our [Kazakhstani] literature and occupy the niche that is, in fact, ours to fill. Let it not be paper literary journals, let it be online journals, but we have an unploughed field, so to speak, we lack a lot, and instead of going over there, we must first develop what is here. But again, there are enough problems in Kazakhstani literature that we need to solve so that our authors don't gravitate towards Russia, and that might take a long time.

*N.F. I would now like to find out more about your journal, *Daktil* – could you briefly introduce it for those who don't know it yet: why it was founded, the ideas behind it, what it publishes in general. And what has changed since the journal was founded?*

*S.K.* Irina has now very accurately described the lack of platforms in Kazakhstan and the desire of our authors to be published in Russian journals. The idea of our own online journal has therefore been in the air since approximately the 2000s. It was often discussed, and I also quite often heard and thought about it myself. We already have "Prostor" in Almaty, and we also had "Niva", which is now closed. But "Prostor" alone is not sufficient, because it has a rather obscure scheme of manuscript selection and it is still connected to the Writers' Union of Kazakhstan, an institution that many of us find questionable. So there was already demand for a platform and "Daktil" appeared two years ago as an attempt to fill this gap, an attempt to unite Kazakhstani authors and prevent them from scattering, from dispersing among journals in Russia and other countries, so that we would have something at home. And, essentially, the concept has not changed: the journal serves, first of all, as a cross-section of contemporary Kazakhstani Russian-language literature. "Daktil" is a monthly journal, which means that it comes

---

of Soviet Kazakhstan, demanding a stake in the political process, while protesting against their perceived status as second-class citizens in their own country. Buoyed by Gorbachev's slogans about "glasnost" and "perestroika", they assailed Moscow's appointment of a new party leader for Kazakhstan, Gennadii Kolbin, objecting on the grounds that he was an ethnic Russian from outside the republic. The protest spread to other towns before being suppressed by Soviet security forces in what was dubbed Operation Snowstorm.

out every month and is structured like a traditional print journal – there are sections of poetry, prose, and criticism, and sometimes there are supplemental sections, when we have enough texts. Each section has its own editor. All of the poetry manuscripts that come to the journal are edited by Irina, for example, although there are actually not many, so Irina has to actively search for them herself among her acquaintances.

**I.G.** Yes, this is a really big problem... On the one hand, it's good that we've expanded the journal's geographical reach in order to publish authors from Russia, and from different cities – we receive submissions from Uzbekistan, and if I am not mistaken, someone from Poland has also sent us poetry. But the problem is that there are very few Kazakhstani authors. We cannot publish the same authors in every issue, yet from time to time, when I realise that I don't have any material for the next issue, I simply have to visit these known poets, or write to them on social media and beg them for poems. And it frustrates and upsets me, because we are a large country, we are a talented country, we have a lot of talented authors. But when poems from the regions come in, I see that their level is simply not up to our standards, and therefore I must reject them. So, on the one hand there is an awareness of the fact that there is a platform where you can publish, but on the other hand there is no way to raise the standard. The people in the regions somehow stew in their own juice. In Almaty we still have a literary school that helps us maintain the standard and strive towards excellence, but other cities have no such support and that is a problem. Of course, it would be desirable to publish Kazakhstani authors in each issue, in addition to submissions from other countries. But so far, for the last few issues, it has not worked out that way, unfortunately.

**N.F.** *Is this a problem that only applies to poetry, or does it relate to all sections of the journal?*

**S.K.** It applies to poetry, and I think to criticism

too. We have no problem with prose; indeed, we have a lot of short stories, a lot of novels, and good ones at that. It's an astonishing thing that there are so many good short stories and literally no criticism. And yes, the problem with the regions and literary centres is also true. Our main audience consists of graduates of the literary school, which means mostly the city of Almaty and the surrounding area. There is also Astana, with Nazarbayev University, which has a very fascinating student body. We receive some interesting texts from there. But Almaty and Astana outweigh all the other regions for now.

**N.F.** *Do you know who your audience is? We have just been talking about authors, but it would also be interesting to learn about your readership.*

**S.K.** One can open Google analytics and have a look... Our main readership is of course in Kazakhstan, with Russia in second place. And then we have some readers in the United States, Germany, and the rest of Europe as well. But it turns out that Kazakhstan and Russia represent the majority of our readership.

**N.F.** *Could you talk a little bit about how the journal is connected to its literary environment, both in Kazakhstan and possibly in Russia?*

**S.K.** I guess we are the offspring of a literary environment that existed in the joint Russian-Kazakhstani space, including Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and other countries. As a matter of fact, Russia already had such journals – for example “Literatura”, which is also online. Then there is a site called “Polutona” and another site called “Textura”. In other words, there are many online publications, and we have emerged as a reflection of this space, on Kazakhstani soil. So, the connection is very close, and it still exists.

**I.G.** If we are speaking about our own literary community, we inevitably come back to the same problem: that the literary community and probably

most of the literary production are concentrated in Almaty. Thanks to the Musaget Foundation, which no longer exists, many of those who studied there now teach at the Open School of Literature. Yet the school is only open to citizens of Almaty, because there is no possibility of admitting people from other cities. Only when teaching went online did a possibility arise: this year we had authors from Uzbekistan, and I think there was also someone from Germany at our seminar. Accordingly, you find yourself going around in circles here, you come to events and see the same people because we live in the same city and do the same things.

*N.F. Do you have any connections with authors who write in Kazakh? Or have you had any works translated from the Kazakh language?*

*S.K.* We had one set of poems translated from Kazakh into Russian, but this is the exception rather than the rule. We have also had translations from Finnish into Russian. When we do have translations, we always print both the original text and the translation together. But that too is an exception; I think there have been only two collections so far. We don't yet have the resources for that, we have to find a translator, or wait for a completed translation to be sent to us. Initially we thought of making a Kazakh-language version of the journal, but for now this is just an idea that is not likely to come to fruition in the near future.

*N.F. I've spoken with quite a few Russian-speaking authors from Kazakhstan about this, and they all said that currently there is almost no relationship between Russian-speaking authors and authors writing in Kazakh. Do you think so too? Or is this gradually beginning to change?*

*I.G.* The problem here is that we don't have translated literature, and therefore don't have the opportunity to get to know Kazakh-speaking authors. For example, as a reader I would be interested to know what Kazakh-speaking poets and writers are writing

about. But there are simply no translations around that I could read. My knowledge of Kazakh is sadly not good enough to be able to read literary texts. This is a big problem, and because of that I think we have no interaction or unity with authors who write in Kazakh.

*N.F. Do you see any peculiarities of Russian-language literature in Kazakhstan? Are there any thematic peculiarities there, or any particularly poignant topics that you see specifically in "Daktil" and that you haven't encountered in Russian journals yet?*

*S.K.* Well, it's difficult to comment on our journal specifically, because we have such a hodgepodge of authors. But on the whole, I guess bilingualism determines a certain uniqueness of Russian-speaking authors from Kazakhstan. It is this constant struggle of trying to understand who we are, what culture is ours and what culture is not ours, to whom we are indebted and to whom we owe nothing, who the Russian language belongs to, and so on. And now there will be a writer's residency devoted to the topic of Kazakhstani identity. This topic is of such importance that it will likely be discussed for a long time after, because the solution, it seems to me, has not yet been found.

*I.G.* I would agree and add that one peculiarity of modern poetry, and probably not only Kazakhstani poetry, is that accentual-syllabic verse is taking a back seat and free verse is predominant. In fact, people write about different things. Poetry is always varied, poems don't ask what you want to write about, they just come. But to give you some specific examples, there are texts about modernity, mostly ironic ones, by Aleksei Shvabauer. Olga Kurbangalieva and Anastasia Belousova have contemporary texts, and Victoria Rusakova has texts about acute social issues that are bilingual, i.e. using some Kazakh words, expressions and phrases. Ksenia Rogozhnikova, by the way, also uses bilingualism in her poems. But poetry is something personal, and the reader either accepts it or not.

**N.F.** *What do you predict for the future of Russian-language literature in Kazakhstan and maybe beyond its borders?*

**I.G.** Well, it's hard to predict anything here because, as I said earlier, we have enough problems. There is a lack of support at the level of state institutions, although the state, of course, does not owe us anything, even though we would like it to. In general, the development of our Kazakhstani literature as a whole, both Russian-language and Kazakh-language, depends on many factors and, first and foremost, on the authors' desire to develop here [in Kazakhstan] and develop our literature. Because if we all go to the Russian arena, there will be no one left here to fight for our cause. Right now, we have dozens of graduates from the literary school but very few of them are published, and even then only abroad, for example, in Russia. We don't have enough publishing houses specialising in Kazakhstani authors to be able to promote Kazakhstani literature here among our readers, because it's not yet popular. While prose is still somehow being published, the situation with poetry is very sad. But the other problem is that there is a lack of serious literary criticism, which would lead people to read a review and then go out and buy the book. Then again, very few people read paper books now, since everything is on the Internet, so this is another challenge, and it is not yet clear how things will develop in this respect here. There are many barriers, but if we manage to bring together all the authors in Kazakhstan – those who write in Russian, in Kazakh, and perhaps in some other language, because we have a multinational country... I mean, if we create a literary community, similar to the one in Russia, where everyone knows and supports each other, and all the names are on everyone's lips... We don't have that. Here everything is scattered, which prevents us from developing further. If we manage to unite in some way, then we will probably be able to solve these problems, overcome these barriers, and develop Kazakhstani literature without having to go anywhere else.

**S.K.** I completely agree with what Irina said. It

seems to me that the question about the future of Russian-language literature in Kazakhstan is essentially a question about the future of Kazakhstan, because literature will in some way reflect all of these different developments – what will happen to the Russian language in Kazakhstan in the coming decades, what will happen to our political system, whether we will become more or less democratic. So the real question is about the direction of future developments and how we will talk and write about them. And that is still unclear.

**N.F.** *And what are your hopes for the journal? Where do you see it, if not in ten years' time, then in a year?*

**S.K.** Of course I would like to wish for something big, but if we are being realistic, we would probably like more poetry and criticism. I think that everything that happens to our journal, to some extent, reflects the developments of Russian-speaking literature in Kazakhstan. This is why it is hard to make any predictions – we will be like a mirror, perhaps a crooked one, I don't know, but we will reflect everything that is happening in our literature and then we will see... It's interesting for us too, I think.

**I.G.** I would like “Daktil” to become a platform where authors can get to know each other and read each other's work, allowing for the kind of unity I have already mentioned. But so far this is very difficult, because there is still the question of publicity, and there is neither the strength, nor the means, nor the opportunity of launching a large-scale PR campaign, so we have managed to exist so far on our own resources. I hope more poems will come and that there will be plenty to choose from. This is very important for me, as a poetry editor. I'm even jealous of the prose section because I see how many submissions they have!

◇ *“Like a Crooked Mirror”: A Conversation with Irina Gumyrkina and Sergey Kim on Post-Soviet Kazakhstan* ◇

Nina Friess, Irina Gumyrkina, Sergey Kim

**Abstract**

A Conversation with Irina Gumyrkina and Sergey Kim on Post-Soviet Kazakhstan.

**Keywords**

Interviews, Irina Gumyrkina, Sergey Kim, Post-Soviet Kazakhstan.

**Author**

*Nina Friess* is a researcher at the Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOiS) Berlin. She holds a PhD in Slavic Studies from Potsdam University. Her research interests include Russophone literature/s and culture/s, memory studies, and children’s and youth literature.

*Irina Gumyrkina* is a journalist and editor of the Poetry section. She is a graduate of the Open Literary School in Almaty and the studio of the Moscow publishing house STiKHI. Her poems have been published in Kazakhstani and Russian literary periodicals. She is the author of two books of poetry, *Skvoz’ tmu i svet* (Almaty, 2020) and *Svoistvo veshchei* (Moscow, 2021). Her poems have won several Kazakhstani and international awards.

*Sergey Kim* is the editor and co-creator of “Daktil”. He holds a master’s degree in Russian literature from the University of Tartu and another master’s degree in Russian studies from the University of Helsinki.

**Publishing rights**

This work is licensed under **CC BY-SA 4.0**



© (2021) Nina Friess, Irina Gumyrkina, Sergey Kim