CZĘŚĆ I

JĘZYKOZNAWSTWO

"THE WORLD'S COLDEST, NEWEST AND MOST REMOTE CAPITAL" – THE PERCEPTION OF ASTANA BY THE BRITISH AND AMERICAN QUALITY PRESS: A CORPUS-ASSISTED ANALYSIS

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Abstract. Nur-Sultan (until recently called Astana), is the capital of Kazakhstan, which in 1998 was moved from Alma-Ata to a small village located in the central part of the country in the middle of a vast Kazakh Steppe. The capital is mostly known for its severe climate, futuristic and technologically advanced architecture, as well as for organizing international political and economic events, resulting from the growing power of Kazakhstan in Central Asia. The aim of this paper is to: (1) find out whether, and if so to what extent, the word *Astana* spurs interest in two British and two American newspapers representing right-wing and left-wing political alignment; (2) check how Astana is evaluated by these newspapers (whether in negative, positive, or neutral terms); (3) observe whether there are any differences between the conservative and the liberal papers as well as between the British versus American press. The material was gleaned from a ca. 35 billion word timestamped press corpus. Four subcorpora (altogether ca. 650,000 words in size) were created based on articles retrieved from *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Guardian*, *Chicago Tribune* and *The New York Times*, published between 2014-2018. The results have shown that the predominant themes in both British and American press include the ultra-modern architecture of Astana and political events (international summits) organized in the capital. The majority of comments have positive or neutral evaluation.

Key words: press discourse, Astana (Kazakhstan), corpus analysis

1. Introduction

Nur-Sultan, up till recently called Astana, is oftentimes said to be the second Dubai. The analogies are quite obvious: both are capital cities of oil-rich countries, they were built almost from scratch in a dry and hot climate, and they both have impressive, fancy, ultra-modern buildings, including record high skyscrapers. Dubai was built on a dessert and evolved from a small port, whereas Astana was built on a steppe and evolved from Aqmola (former Tseliningrad), a small, lacklustre town of marginal importance in the middle of the vast, flat, and empty Central Asian Steppe, with grim Soviet-style edifices, a town that for a moment gained in importance in the '50s during Nikita Khrushchev's failed Virgin Islands Programme (cultivating cotton on steppes). Modern Dubai, with very high constructions of skyscrapers and artificial islands, launched in the '70s, when revenues flowing from recently established oil trade started to bring in substantial profits. On the 6 of July 2018, in turn, the 20th birthday of Astana was celebrated countrywide. The capital is a relatively recent achievement of architects and is still in the process of vigorous expansion. It is a constant construction site, a brave outcome of a joint vision of the heads of the two states as well as top-notch foreign, renowned designers, including Lord Norman Foster, Kisho Kurokawa and Manfredi Nicoletti. The city of Astana also has UAE accents, with the Abu Dhabi Plaza, still under construction, to host the tallest building in Central Asia (380 metres, 88 floors) located in the city center, designed by famous architects from a UAE and London firm called HKR. Once a place of exile, set amid the endless Kazakh Steppe, with crumbling Soviet housing, it is now a city proud of its flashy, glittering and shiny, modern architecture, and of advanced technology designs, with high aspirations and ambitions of being a widely recognized and acknowledged capital.

The capital of Kazakhstan was moved from Almaty in 1998. Interestingly, its name was changed from Alma-Ata (meaning the father of apples), which was used in the Soviets' times, to its Kazakh version Almaty, as a consequence of the policy of returning to the cultural roots of the indigenous inhabitants of the Steppes. Almaty remained the financial capital, while Astana (which in Kazakh simply means "capital") became the new seat of the government and has seen rapid development over the last twenty years. Recently, the capital was renamed again to Nur-Sultan, the name of the Kazakh president, the longest-serving post-Soviet leader, who after 20 years stepped down in February 2019. However, since the paper investigates the occurrences and contexts revolving around the word *Astana*, we will adhere to this name of the city throughout the paper.

After declaring independence by the Republic of Kazakhstan on the 16 of December in 1991 (as the last post-Soviet republic getting out of Russian jurisdiction), the first president of the independent Kazakhstan, Nur-Sultan Nazarbayev, implemented a series of reforms to spur innovation and change by boosting entrepreneur-

ship, privatizing industry, liberalizing trade and opening country to foreign capital and technology. Administrative barriers were reduced and a generally favourable investment climate was created. The long-term vision was triggering economic growth and becoming an important player on the international political arena, as well as in Central Asia and the global (energy) market. The high aspirations were not unjustified as Kazakhstan is the ninth largest country in the world, and rich in natural resources, primarily oil and gas (but also coal and uranium). After the long period of Russian domination and its disastrous effect on the Kazakh economy (as well as the Kazakh language and culture), in particular during communism, marked by inappropriate agriculture and nuclear testing, Kazakhstan is now the third industrial power in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) (Spence, 2009).

In the wake of all the transmission period changes, not only Kazakhstan but in particular its new capital seems to attract more and more attention of the foreign press, both due to its unusual architecture (by some adored, by others criticized) as well as international political and economic summits, trade and sporting events held in the capital. In the analysis which follows, the word *Astana* will be analysed in the context of four quality newspapers. Two of them are British (*The Daily Telegraph* and *The Guardian*) and two are American (*Chicago Tribune* and *The New York Times*). The choice of these newspapers was dictated by their political alignment. The papers illustrate two different political stances: right-wing policy is associated with *The Daily Telegraph* (henceforth DT) and *Chicago Tribune* (henceforth CT), while *The Guardian* (henceforth G) and *The New York Times* (henceforth NYT) have a liberal and central slant. All four papers represent quality press of high circulation. *The Daily Telegraph* has a circulation of ca. 360,000 copies a day, whereas *The Guardian* distributes ca. 140,000 copies. *The New York Times* enjoys one of the highest circulations in the USA, which is ca. 570,000 paper copies, while *Chicago Tribune*, also one of the top eight quality newspapers, sells 550,000 copies per day (all circulation data come from Wikipedia, accessed 18 May 2019).

The aim of this paper is to: (1) find out whether, and if so to what extent, Astana spurs interest in the two British newspapers and the two American newspapers under scrutiny (by resorting to numerical data); (2) check how Astana is evaluated by these newspapers (whether in negative, positive, or neutral terms); (3) observe whether there are any differences between the right-wing and the left-wing papers as well as the British versus American press.

2. The methodology and data

The methodology used in this paper follows a corpus-assisted approach to large data analysis. While language corpora in the studies of language have already been widely used in linguistics for over thirty years, in the study of press discourse, cor-

pus linguistics has achieved less attention; yet, with a growing number and size of press corpora available for research, it spurs more and more interest (McEnery and Wilson, 1996; Baker, 2006; Bednarek, 2006; Biber et al. 2007; Baker et. al., 2013; Bączkowska, 2016; Bednarek and Caple, 2017; Bączkowska, 2019a, Bączkowska, 2019b). A corpus-assisted analysis of the perception of Astana, or Kazakhstan, in the British and American online press, to the best of our knowledge has not been an object of research so far.

   The material published in the newspapers that is analysed in the present study is digital, available online, and it is a part of a large corpus of the world press which is timestamped. The data representing specific years and limited to four titles of the British and American press investigated below were culled from the JSI Timestamped corpus (Bušta and Herman, 2017), which is over 35 billion words in size at this moment. As it is a monitor corpus updated once a month, thus the size increases systematically and exponentially, being, to the best of our knowledge, the biggest corpus available today. The data under inspection cover the years 2014–2018. Most occurrences come from articles published in 2015, next from 2017 and 2014. The structure of the virtual corpora used in the present study is as follows:

Table 1. The number of tokens in four newspaper subcorpora.

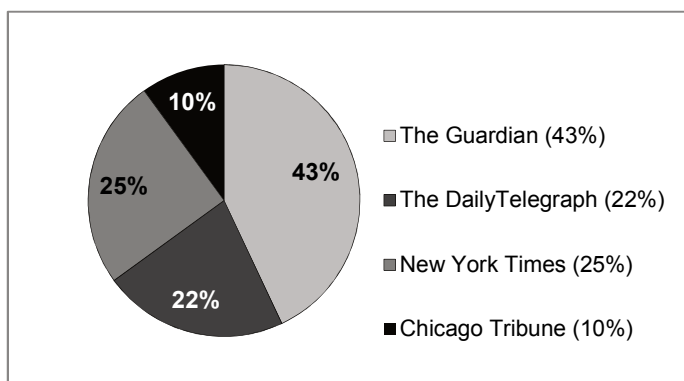| Subcorpus	Number of tokens
G	ca. 278 000
DT	ca. 145 000
NYT	ca. 165 000
CT	ca. 63 000

Fig. 1. The structure of the newspaper corpus in percentages.

Gleaned from the ca. 35 billion words JSI Timestamped corpus, the corpus used for the present study, is ca. 651000 tokens in size, of which *The Guardian* constitutes about 43%, *The Daily Telegraph* makes ca. 22% of the whole corpus, *The New York Times* is about 25%, and *Chicago Tribute* occupies around 10%.

The methodology used in the present study involves three steps. First, a quantitative analysis will be presented based on the parameter of dispersion and frequency of the lemma *Astana* in all four subcorpora. This will be followed by a qualitative analysis. The topics touched upon in the texts will be examined and categorised into prevailing themes. Finally, the positive or negative evaluation of Astana will be analysed.

3. Research results

3.1. Dispersion and frequency

By analyzing frequency plots of the four newspapers it is possible to uncover how frequently the word *Astana* appears in the press as well as whether it is mentioned regularly or sporadically, and for what reason.

Even a cursory glance at the graphs above (Fig. 2-5) reveals an interesting fact. Namely, the word *Astana* occurs more often in the British press than the American press under investigation. This is not surprising and can be most probably explained by the fact that Europe is simply geographically located closer to Kazakhstan than the USA, and this may be the reason why the topic of Kazakhstan attracts interests of the British journalists to a greater extent than overseas newspapers. This may also flow from the fact that for many years Kazakhstan has followed a pro-European policy (visible, for example, in the adjustment of education policies to the European system). The other observation which stems from the dispersion plots concerns the regularity of key word occurrence: the most sporadic appearance of *Astana* is in *Chicago Tribune*, while most systematic in *The Daily Telegraph*.
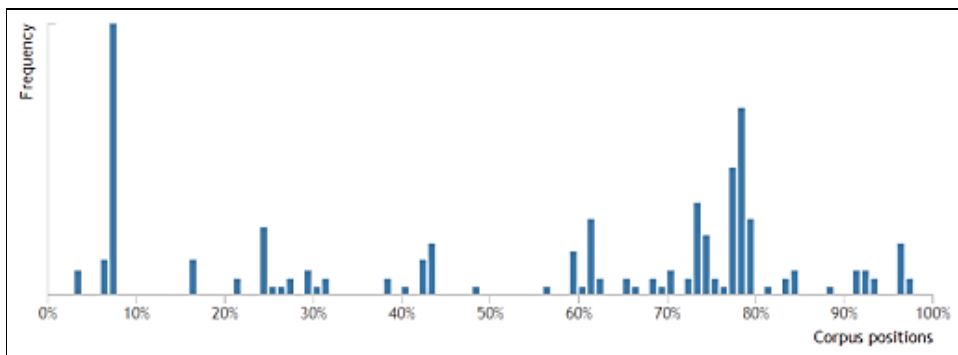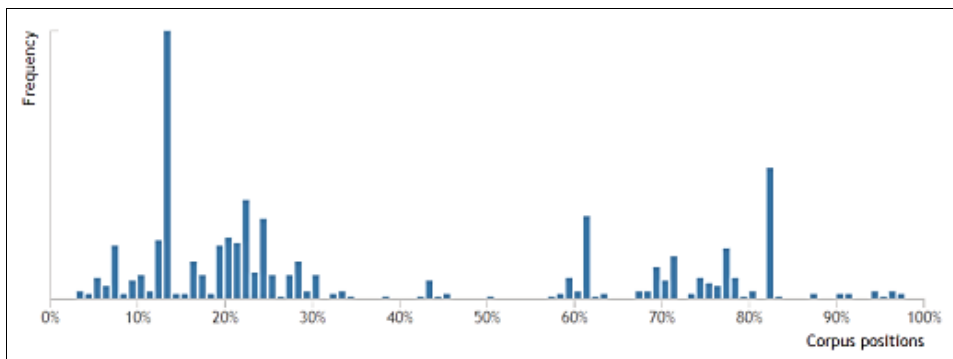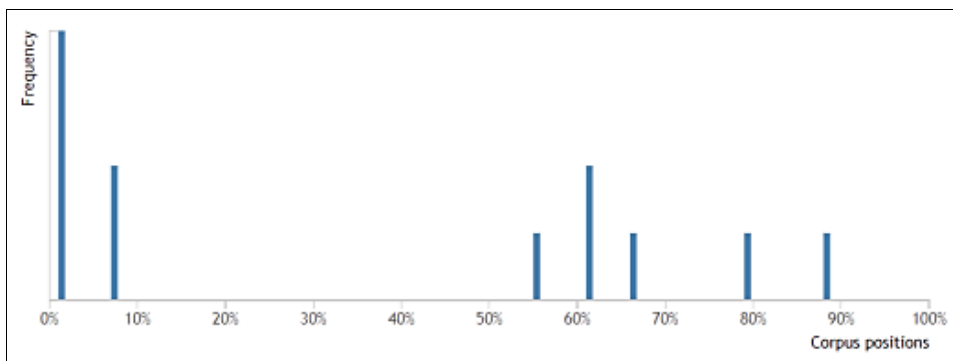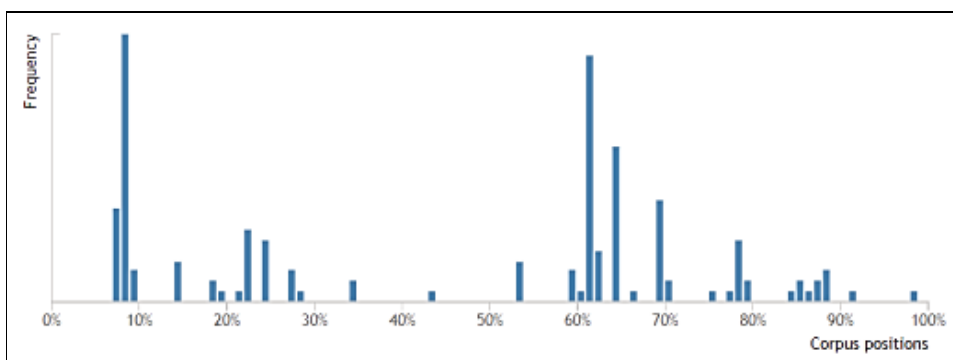

Fig. 2. Frequency plot for *The Daily Telegraph*.

Fig. 3. Frequency plot for *The Guardian*.

Fig. 4. Frequency plot for *Chicago Tribune*.

Fig. 5. Frequency plot for the *New York Times*.

The first observation based on dispersion plots is confirmed by the number of occurrences of contexts whereby the word *Astana* appeared, as can be seen in Table 2. The total number of occurrences includes all concordances automatically retrieved from the corpora, while relevant occurrences are those which described the very city of Astana, as well as politics, economy, climate, or social issues connected with the capital. Thus, they excluded cases where the word *Astana* was used as a modifier (largely in the context of a cycling race). Astana is also used metonymically, to signify something else, as in *Astana* [team] *took the lead*. As a premodifier, it was largely used to denote the origin of the Kazakh racing team, for example, *Astana team*, *Astana Pro Team*, *Astana rider*, etc. Thus, there are numerous contexts where the word Astana was only employed as an adjective describing sportsmen or sports teams rather than the city (or country). For our purposes, the contexts where *Astana* is used as a premodifier to denote collective nouns will not be taken into account.

Table 2. The total number of occurrences of the word *Astana* vs. the number of occurrences considered in the qualitative analysis (with occurrences normalized per 100,000 in the parentheses).

2014-2018	The Guardian	The Daily Telegraph	New York Times	Chicago Tribune
Total number of occurrences	545 (84)	196 (30.1)	152 (23.5)	12 (1.8)
Relevant occurrences	60 (9.3)	21 (3.3)	40 (6.1)	5 (0.8)

The occurrence of the word *Astana* in the four newspapers is low. After normalization per 100,000 words, the number of words in the case of relevant occurrences does not exceed 10 (shown in parenthesis in Table 2).

The adjectives which premodify *Astana* were searched for using the Corpus Query System available via the Sketch Engine (SK) query system (Kilgarriff et al. 2004), where the Timestamped corpus is open to SK subscribers. The aim of this search was to discern evaluative adjectives used in the context of *Astana*.

(meet [tag="J.*"][word="Astana"]1 2)

In *The New York Times* only two premodifiers were found: *snowy* and *subzero*. Both are used in a negative sense in the contexts of the climate of Astana. In *The Daily Telegraph*, the neutral *aforementioned* premodifies *Astana*. *The Guardian* mentions *new* and *younger*, both collocations used in a positive sense while discussing the evolving capital. No adjectival premodification was found in the subcorpus of the *Chicago Tribune*.

3.2. Themes

In *The Daily Telegraph,* the most interest was expressed in 2014 where the cycling event took place, which is represented by the highest spike in Figure 2. The second highest spike represents texts published in 2017 on another sporting event, namely football, taking place in Astana.

Table 3. Themes in *The Daily Telegraph*.

The Daily Telegraph	Positive	Negative	Neutral	Total
Architecture	5	0	0	5
Economy	1	0	4	5
Politics	1	1	2	4
Sports	0	0	6	6
Climate	0	0	1	1
Total	7	1	13	21

The capital is described in positive terms, as a young but ambitious and "futuristic city", with "space-age skyscrapers". A housing complex under construction is described with a planned 1000 ft, year-round ski slope. Yet some modifiers trigger negative connotations, such as "glitzy capital". Politics concerns cooperation with Tony Blair, the UK prime minister at that time, who worked as a consultant for the Kazakh president. Most comments are positive or neutral, and they refer to sports, architecture, economy and politics. One comment concerns the severe climate in Astana, with long and cold winters. This comment is not surprising, considering the location of Astana on the vast and empty Kazakh Steppe, and it is often an issue touched upon both by tourists and journalists. As mentioned in the title, and admitted by one of the British journalists, Astana is "the world's coldest, newest and most remote capital" (Bloomfield 2005, *The Daily Telegraph*).

In *The Guardian*, the majority of citations describe the cycling event of 2014, and the word *Astana* is used metonymically or as a premodifier of a collective noun (484 occurrences denoting the cycling team), hence they were not taken into account. Other comments express opinions on the economy (6 occurrences), social issues (8 occurrences), and sports (7 occurrences). Most contexts revolve around politics (19 occurrences) and architecture (18 occurrences). The majority of them are neutral and positive. Evaluation and themes are tabulated below:

Table 4. Themes in *The Guardian*.

The Guardian	Positive	Negative	Neutral	Total
Architecture	7	7	4	18
Economy	3	2	1	6
Politics	2	2	15	19
Sports	2	0	5	7
Social issues	4	2	2	8
Total	18	13	27	60

The negative comments about architecture regard the fact that the capital is a "flashy toy-city", and "unusual town", with "extravagant buildings", which "spares no expense on advertising to promote a positive image in Western policy-making circles". Yet, at the same time, we can read descriptions of architecture, where Astana is shown as "shiny" and "glistering", of "intra-religious harmony", where mosques, churches and synagogues co-exist. The theme of the economy mainly revolves around Expo 2017, and a city of an "untapped potential" in tourism. Politics concerns easing visa requirements for some countries and blooming relations with China. The remoteness of Astana from other populated places in the vast area of Kazakhstan is criticized by *The Guardian*. However, this comment is unjustified as the reason for changing the location of the capital was moving it more to the centre of Kazakhstan, to make it more accessible to citizens from all parts of this vast country (which is the size of Western Europe).

In <u>*Chicago Tribune*</u>, disregarding the contexts with the word *Astana* occurring as modifiers (concerning the cycling event), only 5 relevant examples have been noted. The topics include the cold weather in Astana, energy storage, and oil-based economy. The technology for energy storage involves using "geothermal technology", or methods "so advanced it was used on the space shuttle". In connection with the World EXPO held in Astana in 2017, *Chicago Tribune* notices in January 2014 that the building designed for EXPO is "hyper-advanced technologically", "energy positive and water-neutral", where water is recycled and energy is not only used but also generated (creating, in fact, a surplus of energy). The climate of the "second-coldest capital city in the world" is very harsh. Evaluation of Astana in this newspaper is neutral and negative (the latter is connected with the harsh climate). The data retrieved from the *Chicago Tribune* subcorpus are, however, insufficient to draw any general conclusions.

In <u>New York Times</u>, in the dispersion plot, contexts about a cycling race and architecture in Astana written in 2014 prevail over other contexts (the cycling race contexts were ignored in the analysis for reasons mentioned above). Eleven exam-

ples are about talks to be held in Astana in 2017 about the Syrian crisis constitute the second spike in Fig. 5. The theme of the Syrian crisis is described mostly in neutral terms.

Table 5. Themes in *Chicago Tribune*.

Chicago Tribune	Positive	Negative	Neutral	Total
Economy	1	0	1	2
Sports	0	0	1	1
Climate	0	2	0	2
Total	1	2	2	5

Table 6. Themes in *The New York Times*.

The New York Times	Positive	Negative	Neutral	Total
Architecture	15	0	3	18
Economy	1	0	6	7
Politics	0	2	9	11
Sports	0	0	1	1
Climate	0	3	0	3
Total	16	5	19	40

The majority of contexts occurring in *The New York Times* concern the architecture in Astana and almost all of them are positive. The capital is described as an "amazing creation", the "Manhattan on the Steppe", "shimmering skyline in the Steppe", "punctuated by gleaming skyscrapers and Western-style shopping malls", with the "tallest skyscraper in Central Asia" being under construction on what is known as Abu Dhabi Plaza, and with "tropical beach with sand shipped directly from the Maldives" (on the top floor of the marquee Khan Shatyr –a yurta shaped shopping mall and entertainment centre designed by Norman Foster). It experiences "a construction boom", attracting top architectural talents, as well as foreign investors, who find Astana an attractive place for investments due to its "rapid economic growth". However, the climate is severe, the capital is snowy, and it "looks vaguely like Las Vegas". The theme concerning politics is mainly connected with the organization or cancellation of political summits where issues regarding the conflict in Syria are to be discussed, whereas the topics revolving around the economy are connected with the organization of Expo in 2017. The predominant themes are architecture and politics, and the evaluation is mostly neutral and positive.

4. Discussion

The striking observation is the fact that despite a large amount of data (over half a million of words) used for the present study, eventually the number of occurrences that could be taken into consideration in the analysis radically dropped. The ultimate number of occurrences of *Astana* in the foreign press under investigation is very small, and thus the interest of the foreign press in the capital of Kazakhstan seems to be marginal. Even if one considers all occurrences of the word *Astana*, including those automatically extracted, with the function of a modifier, the number is still not impressive, remaining below 10 occurrences per 100,000 words. The occurrences of other capitals in Europe (Warsaw in Poland, and Berlin in Germany), and in other Asian states (Bishkek in Kyrgyzstan, and Beijing in China), as well as the names of the states in which they are capitals, put the study in a wider context and they confirm that Kazakhstan and its capital itself remain off the radar for the British and American press under investigation, despite Kazakhstan being the largest economy in Central Asia. Astana and Kazakhstan receive more attention than another state of
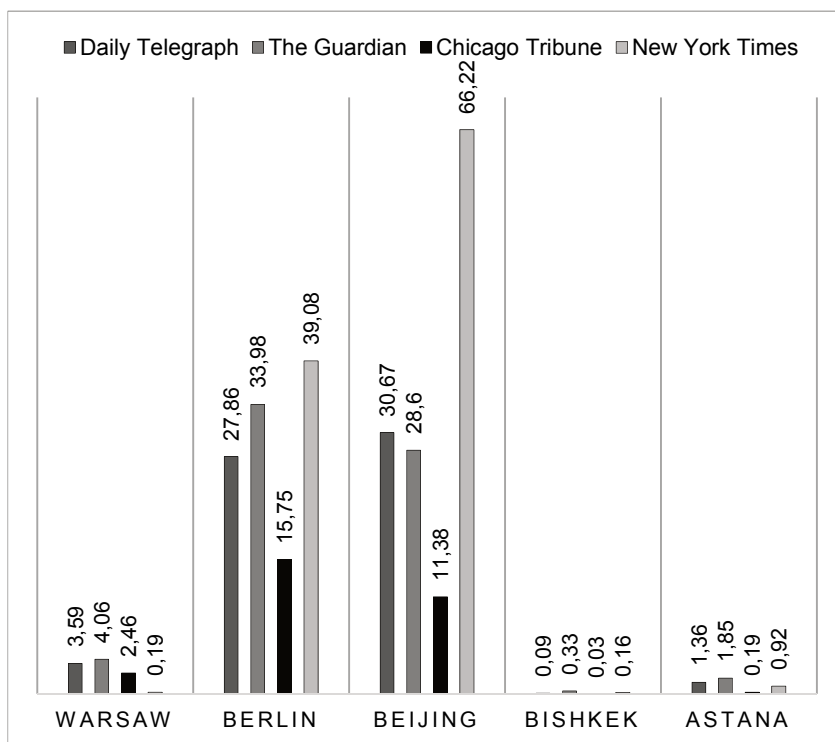

Fig. 6. Occurrences (normalized per 1 million) of *Astana* versus other capitals.

growing importance in Central Asia (Kyrgyzstan), yet they are lagging behind the European countries (of greater or lesson importance regarding the global politics and economy, like Germany and Poland), as well as another Asian booming economy (China).
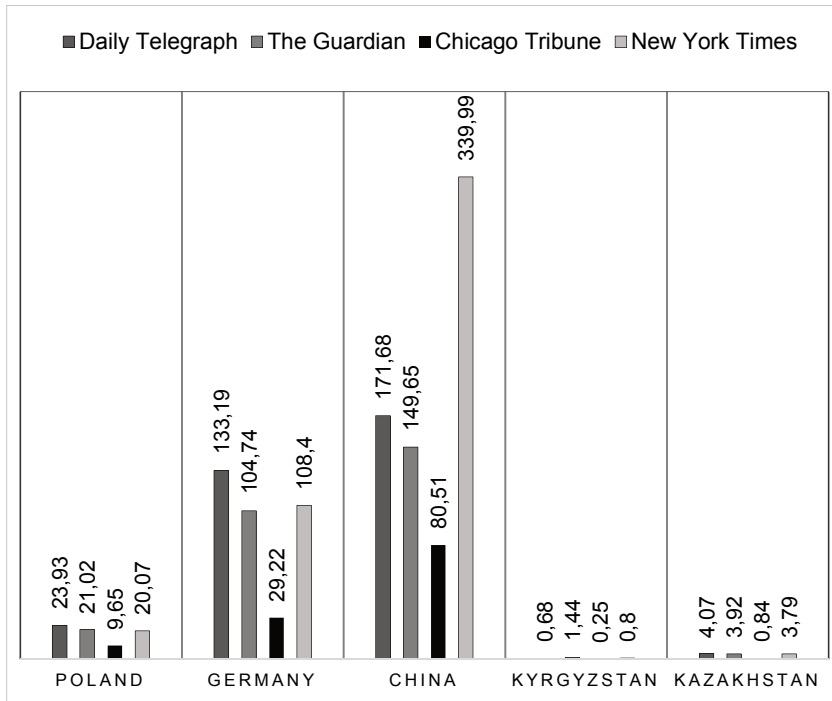
Fig. 7. Occurrences (normalized per 1 million) of *Kazakhstan* versus other countries.

The themes and evaluation represented by all four newspapers are shown in the graphs below. As can be seen, the British conservative newspaper expresses more positive and neutral comments, while the British left-wing paper allows more negative comments than the conservative title. In the American conservative press, more negative and neutral comments can be found, and in the American left-wing paper, positive and neutral comments prevail. There is thus no observable correlation between the newspapers in terms of their political alignment. This lack of visible contrast could stem from the small number of relevant occurrences, despite the large size of the corpus from which they were retrieved. Thus, further research of other newspapers should verify or falsify the results. On the whole, positive and neutral comments dominate over negative ones.
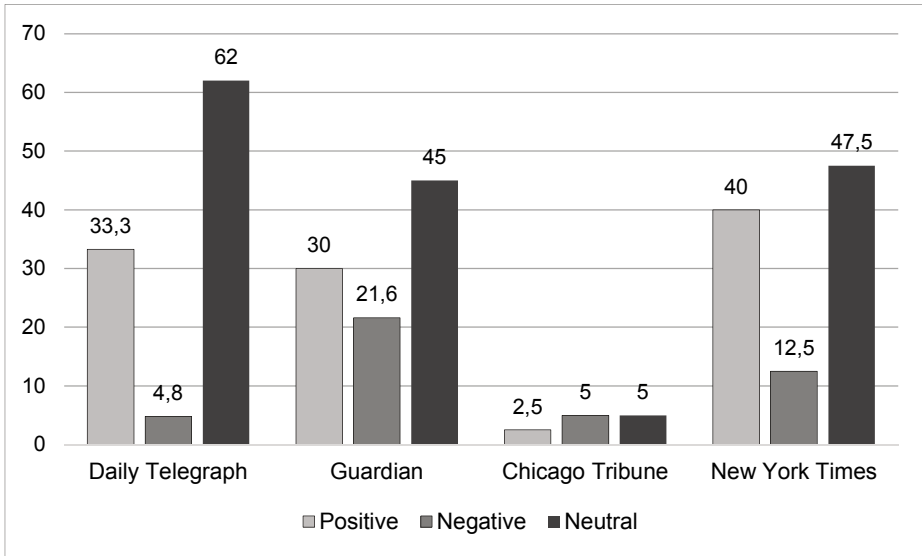
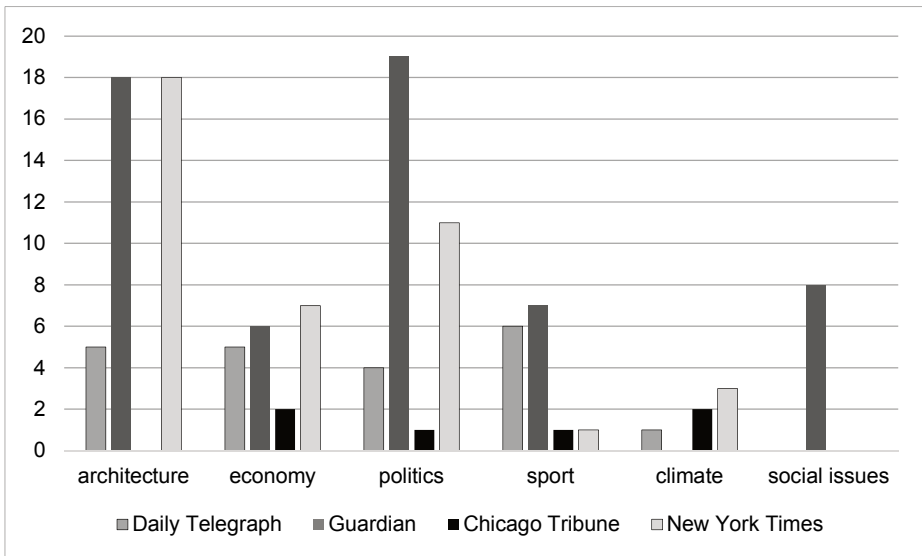Fig. 8. Percentages of evaluative comments across four newspapers

Fig. 9. Themes across four newspapers.

Interestingly, only *The Guardian* mentions social issues, which is not surprising considering the fact that it is a labour-oriented newspaper, wherein social issues have always been in focus. On the other hand, architecture is mentioned by all pa-

pers except for the *Chicago Tribune*. Overall, the most prevalent theme across all relevant data is the architecture of Astana (41 occurrences), and politics (35 occurrences), followed by the economy (20 occurrences) and sports (15 occurrences); finally, by social issues (8 occurrences) and climate (6 occurrences). From this it transpires that in the descriptions of the capital of Kazakhstan, it is architecture and political events that attract most of the attention of the foreign press. If one includes the word *Astana* functioning as a modifier, then it is the topic of sport that is most often mentioned, yet the interest in this topic is predominantly expressed by the European press (notably by *The Guardian*). Left-wing newspapers (*The Guardian* and *The New York Times*) express more interest in the capital of Kazakhstan than the right-wing titles do.

5. Conclusions

The analysis of four newspapers, two representing a liberal and two a conservative political alignment, has revealed that the most frequent themes mentioned by journalists in connection with the word *Astana* are architecture and politics (mostly summits of international leaders held in Astana). It seems therefore that the best promotion of the city, and the country *per se*, is the city's ultra-modern architecture and economic or political summits. Considering contexts resulting from automatic extraction, however, it is sports (mainly cycling races) that is most often mentioned, especially in *The Guardian*.

The left-wing papers devote much more space to issues connected with Astana than the right-wing press. Moreover, the British press devote considerably more attention to the topics revolving around the capital city than the newspapers published in the USA, which can be justified by the closer geographical proximity of Europe and, thus, more interest in Central Asian issues.

By and large, despite Kazakhstan becoming the leading country in Central Asia and an important player on the global energy market, its capital does not seem to spur much interest in the foreign press under scrutiny; however, it definitely spurs the most interest of all Central Asian states. Whenever Astana is mentioned, contexts which are discussed by journalists usually represent a positive or neutral evaluation.

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