



VERSITA

Marek Gawęcki (*Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań*)

NEW URBANIZATION OF THE STEPPE. ASTANA: A CAPITAL CALLED THE CAPITAL

Relocating the capital of Kazakhstan from Almaty to Akmola (then renamed Astana) in 1997 has been the subject of an intense debate, particularly within media. The process of creating the new capital of Kazakhstan should consider the broader perspective of historical, political and ideological, social, climatic and geographical factors, and finally to put the matter in terms of architecture and urban planning. The author considers this very broad perspective, finally expressing the hope that the project of "the city of the future" analyzed in the article, will become a permanent part of the Kazakh reality.

Keywords: *urban history, urban and spatial development, post-Soviet politics*

doi:10.2478/sho-2013-0003

Relocating the capital of Kazakhstan, from Almaty to Akmola (then renamed Astana), in 1997, has been the subject of an intense debate, particularly within media. It has sparked controversy and brought about some radical opinions, ranging from mockery to ecstasy. While some call it "The Disneyland in the steppe", "The New Potemkin Village" and "The Borat's Capital", others praise its futuristic architecture and the grand scale of the enterprise. A couple of academic papers on this topic have also appeared¹.

¹ It is worth mentioning the most important: R.L. Wolfel, *North to Astana: Nationalistic Motives for the Movement of the Kazakh(stani) Capital*, Nationalities Papers, vol.30, No.3, 2002; L. Yacher, *Kazakhstan: Megadream, Megacity, Megadestiny?*, [in:] S.D. Brunn (Ed.), *Engineering Earth. The Impacts of Megaengineering Projects*, vol. 1, Springer Science+Business Media B.V. 2011, pp. 1001-1020; R. Rajiv, *Capital City Relocation: Global-Local Perspectives in the Search for an Alternative Modernity*, Department of Geography York University, Toronto 2005; N.R. Koch, *The City and the Steppe: Territory, Technologies of Government and Kazakhstan's New Capital*, PhD Thesis, University of Colorado, Department of Geography 2012.

It is still commonly believed that the new capital was built from scratch, on the bare steppe, while what we witnessed was actually the process of relocating it to a district town with a population of 300 000 people – Akmola. What is more, Akmola had already been a capital once because it had been the capital of the Tselinnyi District², created as a result of the grand action of ploughing the Kazakh steppe. Already, back then, Soviet authorities (including Nikita Khrushchev) considered the possibility of moving the capital of Kazakhstan to Tselingrad. Some town-planning solutions that much exceeded the needs of the district town were even carried out. However, the idea of relocating the capital was later dropped.

In the days of its “Soviet statehood”, Almaty did not immediately become the capital of the socialist republic. After the Kirghiz Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic³ had been proclaimed in 1920, Orenburg became its capital (after the delimitation of the borders it became a part of Russia). In 1925 the capital of what had already been known as a Kazakh republic was moved to Kyzylorda⁴, a town located in the south of the republic. After four years, in 1929 the capital was moved to a peripheral Alma Ata⁵ (population of around 45,000 people), which was the biggest town of the republic at that time. The town, under the name Almaty,⁶ lost its capital status on December 10, 1997. Although it lost its official capital status, Almaty have kept on developing dynamically, remaining its informal status of capital of business and culture. It is commonly known as “the Southern Capital”.

The decision to relocate the capital to Akmola was made by the Supreme Council of the Republic of Kazakhstan on July 6th, 1994. From this moment intense preparations to adjust the city’s infrastructure for its new purposes as capital began. The city did not have enough buildings,

² This unit (very important for Kazakh SSR) was created based on the decree of CC CPSU from December 26th, 1960. Its area covered 21% of the Republic. It was abolished on October 19th, 1965.

³ At this time the Kazakhs were commonly called Kyrgyz and the contemporary Kyrgyz were Kara-Kyrgyz.

⁴ Until 1920 the city was called Pierovsk, earlier Ak Mechet.

⁵ Until 1921 the city was called Vieryi. It was established as a fortress Zailiyskoye, around which the city emerged (thanks to the Turkestan-Siberia railway) with a population of 10,000 people in 1867.

⁶ The toponym Alma Ata is a deformed form of the Kazakh word Alma-tə, which means “place full of apples”. During the sessions of the Central Executive Committee of the Turkestan ASSR on February 2, 1921 in Vieryi a similar name, Alma Ata, was “made up”, which means “apple-grandfather”. In Soviet publications this name began to be translated as “The Father of Apples”. In 1993, the state authorities, after consultations with language specialists, changed the official name of the city to Almaty.

and the transportation system left a lot to be desired. The airport was basically unprepared to operate international flights. Railways and roads connecting the new capital with Almaty were also in a terrible condition.

FROM THE PAST OF ASTANA

Present-day Astana appeared on the maps in 1830, and back than it was as a small, Russian, wooden fort located on the fortification line of the southern part of the Empire. The selected place was a nature reserve, Ak Mola, which means “a white grave” in Kazakh language. Due to its excellent location (at the crossing of caravan routes from Tashkent and Bukhara), the town quickly started expanding around the fort – stocks of European goods that were to be sold in the Middle East markets were located there. After two years, in 1834, the town obtained town privileges and a Russian name – Akmolinsk. In 1868, the town became the capital of the region (*uiezd*). The number of inhabitants also grew. In 1867 there were 9,500. The population grew quite slowly – in 1923 it was 10,600; by 1939, it was 31,000. The Second World War was a time of stormy development, because some of the strategic industrial sites from the occupied USSR were evacuated and brought here. Thousands of civilians were also evacuated. We should note that old or newly established collective farms and tens of thousands of the so-called displaced (*specpereselentsy*) – mainly from Ukraine (including 60,000 Poles) and Germany – were located in the neighbourhood. Another factor that influenced the development of the city was the move to utilize the area for agriculture. From 1954 the city became the organizational centre of this action. New industrial sites were created in response to dynamically developing agriculture. Between 1960 and 1965, when Akmolinsk (rebranded as Tselinograd) became the capital of the administrative unit, called Tselinny District, a lot of new town planning and architectural enterprises were carried out. New, wider streets were marked out; a couple of buildings of a “capital” character were built (including the congress and concert venue “Dvoretz Tselinnikov” – the second biggest building in USSR, after Kremlin Concert Hall. It was also immensely popular to build two- or three-storey apartment blocks, known until today as “Khrushchev blocks”. The population grew dynamically. In 1959 it was 96,900; in 1979, 230,200 and in 1989, 279,700⁷. The new inhabit-

⁷ *Akmola. Enciklopedija*, Atamura, Almaty 1995, p.36.

ants of Tselinograd were, in majority, non-natives, the so-called "Russian speaking population". Native Kazakhs were definitely in minority. The city completely lacked any ethnic character. After losing its quasi-capital status (as a capital of Tselinnyi District) the city's development came to a halt and the crisis, which struck the whole of the Soviet Union in the days of its demise, led to Tselinograd's complete stagnation. It lasted until it became the capital.

FROM THE PAST OF ALMATY

The history of Almaty, known now as "the Southern Capital", is very similar to Astana's. The town was built around a Russian fort (founded in 1854) and called Viernyi (the town's original name). Russian colonists started coming as early as the first year after the fort had been established. As opposed to Astana, which has harsh, continental climate, Almaty is located in the valley of two rivers at the foot of the Alatau Mountains. A mild climate fostered the development of agriculture in the river valleys. Due to this location it was also possible to control trade routes to Tashkent, Bukhara, Samarkand and Kashgar. In 1867 Viernyi became the capital of the newly established district. Thirty years later it had a population of 22,000. Unfortunately, the town lies in a seismic area and during its short history it experienced two damaging disasters. As a result of the first one (in 1887), 322 people died and 1,798 brick houses were destroyed. The next one, in 1911, was just as severe. The city also lies in a danger zone for mud and rock avalanches (the so-called *siel*) - the heaviest one occurred in 1921. Despite those disasters the city centre (thanks to its other qualities) developed very dynamically. However, after the latter catastrophe the location of the city centre was slightly changed. What favoured the development was the fact that this city (in 1921 renamed Alma Ata) became in 1929 the capital of, firstly Kazakh ASSR and then, in 1936, Kazakh SRR and finally, in 1991, an independent state of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Dynamic growth of the city occurred, similar to Akmola, but on a much bigger scale, during the Second World War. At this time 30 large industrial sites, 15 universities, 20 scientific research institutes and 20 culture and educational institutions were relocated here from the western parts of the USSR. It was at this time and in the first post-war years that some architectural changes took place in the city - many large administration and civ-

il buildings were built⁸. Although most of the evacuated returned to their original headquarters after the war, the new infrastructure remained; as well, many specialists from industry, science and art stayed, as new opportunities were created in the city, untouched by the war. What encouraged people to remain was also the climate and recreation opportunities. Almaty has been, and probably will be for a very long time, the largest city of the republic. According to the 2009 census, the number of inhabitants was 1,365,632⁹. It has kept on developing, despite losing the status of the capital and the migration of many specialists (mostly these connected with the public administration) to Astana.

As we can see Kazakhstan changed its capital repeatedly in the past. However, all those changes cannot be compared with the latest one. Never had it been a sovereign decision of Kazakhstan, but of Moscow. During the Soviet period, only one city (in all possible respects including the social one) was a true capital – and that was Moscow. Moscow was the centre of the political and economic power and home to the government that held real power.

ARGUMENTS FOR AND AGAINST

The process of relocating the capital has taken place in many countries¹⁰. The most famous ones (to which to a certain degree president Nursultan Nazarbayev referred to) are relocating the capital of Turkey (from Constantinople to Ankara in 1923), Brazil (from Rio de Janeiro to Brasilia in 1960) and Nigeria (from Lagos to Abuja in 1991). Many factors of a political, economic or security nature influenced these decisions, which are so important for the state and nation. We cannot rule out one more factor – the ambitions of the political leaders. Realising such projects is much easier in authoritarian states where the “argumentation” of the leader is much more easily accepted by the society, than in democratic states, where there are certain consultation procedures, and where the financial aspect connected with such an enterprise might be disputed.

⁸ Fronts of many of them are decorated with elements which are associated with local folklore. Many Japanese war prisoners were employed to build them.

⁹ *Results of the 2009 National Population Census of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Analytic Report*, Astana 2011, p. 13

¹⁰ The article of Marcin Kula: *Przeprowadzki stolic*, in: “*Studia Regionalne i Lokalne*”, Nr 1(43)/2011 includes many interesting data on this topic.

The idea of relocating the capital of young independent Kazakhstan was definitely a private project of president Nursultan Nazarbayev. It came up during the first years of independence and in the years of deep economic crisis (resulting from the fall of the Soviet Union). Here is how the author of the project describes it in his book "The Kazakhstan Way":

On July 6th 1994, while speaking to the General Assembly at the session of the Supreme Council of the Kazakhstan Republic, I mentioned the issue of moving the capital. I argued that Almaty, due to economic and geopolitical conditions, is not suitable enough to be the centre of an independent state. With a population reaching 1.5 million the city was becoming less and less promising – due to its territorial range and the problem of land management. The only solution would be to expand its borders, but because the city was very compact without any extra space, it was impossible.

Furthermore, because of the location in the seismic danger zone, building new sites in Almaty would cost much more than locating them in different cities in Kazakhstan. As an independent state we needed new administration buildings: the Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Defence, but also banks and other offices, including embassies. (...)

Since northern districts are a lot less populated than the southern ones, it would be beneficial to direct the stream of migration there. The new capital had to be located closer to big, developing industrial centres and not to be as isolated as Almaty¹¹.

Later, the president gave some arguments for moving the capital to Astana, which were allegedly not used by the officials, but were nonetheless described in media:

The official argument was lack of development perspectives for Almaty (the city is located in the basin, at the foothill), ecological problems of the "old capital", the seismic danger, proximity of the Chinese border, and location in the geographical "dead end", which made communication with different regions of the republic difficult. What was also mentioned was the need to develop the northern part of Kazakhstan and the will to erase the memories of the events of 1986, when the student's riots overtook the city's main square¹². (...) Directing the farmers from the south to the north would increase the population of the Kazakhs in the northern districts and would solve the problem of unemployment¹³.

¹¹ N. Nazarbayev [Nazarbayev], *Kazachstańska droga*, Warszawa / Astana, 2007, pp. 289-90.

¹² Tragic protest of the students, which was the result of appointing a Russian, G. Kolbin as the 1st Secretary of the KPK. Traditional *modus vivendi* according to which this position had always been held by a Kazakh and its deputy had always been a non-native, was broken. The protests took place from December 16th to December 19th. They were brutally suppressed by OMON. Around 200 people died. Nursultan Nazarbayev was the Prime Minister at the time.

¹³ N. Nazarbayev, *Kazachstańska droga*, p. 296.

Nazarbayev's argument (that Almaty did not meet the requirements of the metropolis due to economic reasons) does not sound convincing. It was the metropolis in its glorious days and has remained a dynamically developing economic centre after losing its status as capital. According to Nazarbayev, the new capital would have had to be located closer to a large, promising industrial centres. However, there are some large, industrial sites located both in the south of the country, near Almaty, and in the north. All of them have a chance of becoming promising. The argument of lack of free space is also debatable. In Almaty there were a lot of districts of a rural character. They made the city characteristic and varied, but were far from the metropolitan model. Currently those districts are being torn down and the modern residential quarters and business centres, similar to those built in Astana (in terms of standards and representativeness) are being built instead.

Without a doubt, peripheral location of Almaty (particularly the proximity of the Chinese border) was a strong argument supporting the relocation of the capital. This argument appealed to most of the society, which has a deeply embedded fear of China. Another strong and objective argument is Almaty's location in the seismic danger zone. In the period between announcing the president's decision and an actual relocation, this factor was very heavily exploited. It is hard to say now whether in this period the danger of an earthquake was real or this possibility was simply over interpreted for propaganda purposes¹⁴. According to the research conducted in 2010 by N.R. Koch, on "social" interpretation of the decision to relocate the capital, this "seismic" argument was the most accepted one. Interviewees also mentioned other important and justified arguments: the aforementioned argument of lack of space in Almaty; the fact that the capital should be located in the centre of the country and that a new, independent Kazakhstan needed a new capital, which, due to its location should be safe in case of an invasion. It was also mentioned that the state's position should be strengthened in the north of the country, which

¹⁴ The author lived in Almaty in the years 1994-2000 and witnessed many alarms and drills of the rescue services. The place of evacuation was pointed out, and people were instructed what to do during an earthquake. Upon hearing the sound signals, it was advised to turn on the television and follow the instructions. This long instruction was first given in Kazakh language (a result of the decision to make the media Kazakh) and then in Russian. Back then, when the majority of people did not speak Kazakh well enough, in a situation of a real danger, such information was completely pointless. The advice was mostly ignored by the people who were used to earthquakes.

was threatened by the separatist Russian movements and that relocation was justified by the clan policy¹⁵. The last two arguments, both in the official announcements and among the public (as a result of the research of the aforementioned author) were not the most important; they were considered vital by both the intellectual and scientific elites and by the research centres. Thus, they need further explanation.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, the problem of the borders of the republics was raised in different circles. The borders, which in the Soviet state did not play any major role also did not limit people's mobility- in this new situation they were the subject of debate. This was also the case with the northern Kazakh border, with the Russian Federation. In the areas close to the border, native Kazakhs were a minority. Russians and the so-called Russian speaking people (*rusскоязычные*), mostly Slavic (including the Poles deported in 1936 from the regions of the western Ukraine) dominated there. In many regions of the northern districts of Kazakhstan they made up to 80% of the population. In 1989, in Astana (Tselinograd at the time) the Kazakhs were only 17% of the population. Nationalistic Russian circles, both in Russia and in Kazakhstan, including the revived Cossack organizations, brought up the issue of borders, which practically meant joining those areas to Russia. What heated up the situation was the famous manifesto of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn "How to Rebuild Russia", published in September 1989, in *Komsomolskaya Pravda* and *Literaturnaya Gazeta*. He wrote that, if Kazakhs shepherds walked their sheep across some territories twice a year it did not mean that those territories were theirs. Such a statement, coming from a famous Russian author, irritated Kazakh elites. There were voices trying to prove that, on the northern side of the border in question, there were some big groups of Kazakh people, who treated it as their native land; therefore, Kazakhstan can claim these areas. The argument, which was sometimes brought up, was that Orenburg, as the first capital of the Kazakh Socialist Autonomy should be within the borders of the Kazakhstan Republic. However, these arguments were much weaker. But the problem of Russian separatism in the early 1990s was a big problem that a young state had to face. One of the top objectives was to change the ethnic structure, which meant increasing

¹⁵ N.R. Koch, *The City and the Steppe: Territory, Technologies of Government and Kazakhstan's New Capital*, PhD Thesis, University of Colorado, Department of Geography, 2012, p.132, http://gradworks.umi.com/cgi-bin/redirect?url=http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl%3furl_ver=Z39.882004%26res_dat=xri:pqdiss%26rft_val_fmt=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:dissertation%26rft_dat=xri:pqdiss:3527307 [access date: 20.12.2012].

the number of ethnic Kazakh in question in those areas. This situation was partially changed due to a mass emigration of the Russians, repatriation of the Germans and, to a lesser extent, repatriation of the Poles. Relocating the capital to the north brought some great expectations, as it might have fostered migration of the natives to those lands.

When considering the issue of ethnic transformation associated with moving the centre of power to the north of the country, we have to note that it cannot be considered solely in relation: Kazakhs vs. others. We have to remember that Kazakhstan had been a multiethnic society. This disparity, often difficult to notice for an outsider, is important for the domestic politics. Traditional ethnic divisions were not demolished by the Soviet system, and in an independent country they were reborn with new powers.

Kazakh nation is divided into three large “super tribes”, called *zhuz*¹⁶. Each of them covers a precisely defined territory. The old *zhuz* dominates in the southern regions of the country. The young *zhuz* covers the western, and the middle *zhuz*-northern. Each of them consists of a few dozen tribes. Within every *zhuz* there is an inner hierarchy and competition. Furthermore the *zhuz* compete with each other. In the past, the only time when the *zhuz* cooperated with each other was to fight off a common enemy. The representatives of the super*zhuz* aristocracy, the so-called White Bone (*ak suiek*) are an important category in the Kazakh society. They are considered to be the descendants of the families, who are either directly related to the prophet Mohammad (the so-called *kozha*) or Genghis Khan (so-called *tore*).

Almaty is located in the territory of the old *zhuz*, also the author of the idea to relocate the capital, president Nursultan Nazarbayev comes from this *zhuz*, from the Shaprashty tribe¹⁷.

In the days of Tsar dependency, in the Soviet period and in the first years of independence, the hegemony of the old *zhuz* could be observed when it came to taking the most important positions in the country. It was not welcomed by the representatives of the two other *zhuz*. In 2000, 23 out of the 51 most important positions in the country were taken by the members of the old *zhuz*, 13 by the middle, 6 by the young and 9 by the repre-

¹⁶ Called, particularly in the older reference books, *orda*.

¹⁷ In the first years of independence, within the foreign media, false information spread that Nazarbayev came from the middle *zhuz*, and, based on this information, there was speculation that one of the reasons to relocate was to locate it in his ethnic territory.

sentatives of other nationalities (Russian, Germans) or Kazakhs that did not belong to the *zhuz* structure¹⁸.

Nazarbayev, coming from the old *zhuz*, despite the genuine authority that he enjoyed among the majority of the Kazakhs, surrounded himself with the representatives of his own *zhuz*. It was partially a necessity, because those were the elites that the Soviet system had left (of which he was also a part) and partially because it was a result of the tangling into local traditional national-tribal relationships. His closest cooperatives were either from his own family, Shaprashty, or from his hometown Chemolgan¹⁹. The decision of the president to leave the territory of his old *zhuz* was probably also dictated by the will to set him free from local relationships and, therefore, to enable him to conduct a more ethnically balanced HR policy – something he has not completely succeeded at. According to a specialist of ethno-political Middle East politics, Edward Schatz²⁰, expected migration of the Kazakhs from the south of the country could lead to an alliance between the middle and the old *zhuz* and balance out separatist tendencies of the non-native people in the north. It seems that currently those tendencies are an **intangible** threat for territorial integrity of the state; thus this peculiar inter-*zhuz* alliance seems unlikely. We might expect escalation of tension resulting from the inflow of the skilled specialists (coming from the south) who, considering their relationship with the authorities take the privileged position in this place. Until now we have not witnessed any large-scale migration of the farmers from the older *zhuz* to the north. One of the reasons is entirely different climate.

THE RELOCATION

Information that on December 10th, 1997 Akmola would become the capital was included in the presidential decree “On Proclaiming the City

¹⁸ A. Nurlan, *Zhuzes and Kazakhstan's Social and Political Development*, http://www.ca-c.org/journal/2000/journal_eng/eng03_2000/14.amrekul.shtml [access date: 20.05.2005].

¹⁹ This situation is well-described by a joke I have heard in Kazakhstan: *Two Kazakhs meet. One asks the other: “Do you know what Shaprashty means?” “What a silly question!”*, replies the other, *“Everyone knows it is a presidential clan”*. “No”, replies the first, *“It is not a clan, it is a position”*.

²⁰ Schatz, Edward, *When Capital Cities Move: The Political Geography of Nation and State Building*, Kellogg Institute, Working Paper #303 – February 2003, p.18.

of Akmola the Capital of the Republic of Kazakhstan” from October 7th of that year. On November 8th national symbols were formally conveyed there.

The decision to adapt the city to its new, capital functions was made in October 1996 and the construction works began in January the following year. In the beginning, few new buildings were constructed. The majority of government institutions operated in adapted buildings. The main offices of the district authorities were rebuilt to become the president’s office; the headquarters of trade unions became the Parliament, and the hotel “Moscow” was turned into the office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The old Tselinni Palace was turned into the modern Congress Hall. Some ministries were temporarily located in other district towns in northern Kazakhstan. For the first few years the Ministry of Agriculture operated in the town of Kokshetau. Part of the government offices remained in the old capital for longer, and those that were relocated (including the president’s office) had its branches in Almaty.

The immanent feature, which proves the capital status of the city, is the presence of the diplomats accredited in a given state. Diplomats remained sceptical about the authenticity and stability of the new capital for quite a long time²¹. The process of transferring the embassies have lasted for many years, and it still has not come to an end – the Embassy of Uzbekistan is still in Almaty. However, the new capital began to function. Its formal presentation to the guests from all over the world and diplomatic corps took place on June 10th 1998.

The initial plan of spatial reconstruction and the city’s development (located mainly on the right bank of the Ishim River) was quite modest. It assumed the population growth to about 400,000 people and the expansion of the city area by about 400 hectares. It was supposed to be a modern city, complying all practical criteria, which were the cause for this relocation and to be the trademark of a young country. Two important factors influenced further, dynamic development of the new capital. Thanks to increased oil extraction and the increase of its price in the world markets, Kazakhstan’s export income increased significantly, which influenced the development of many aspects of life and allowed it to realise more ambitious plans to develop Akmola. Investors who were applying for permits

²¹ The majority of diplomats managed to “make themselves comfortable” in Almaty (engaging substantial means), and the idea to move to the city with a very inhospitable climate and no infrastructure stopped diplomats from moving there. The first to move were the embassies of Russia, USA, Ukraine and the Apostolic Nunciature.

to extract fossil fuels were encouraged to “voluntarily” support a fund, created for the purposes of the city’s development. The economic situation went hand-in-hand with the strengthening of Nazarbayev’s position as president in an international arena – mainly owing to his **active** promotion of the idea of Europe-Asia integration in various aspects of economic and cultural life and the policy of regional security. In this situation, the president decided to make Astana, not only a modern capital and the symbol of the country, but also a heart of Eurasia.

NEW FACE OF THE NEW CAPITAL

New needs, but also new possibilities called for reviewing the initial, modest plan to develop the city. Its new objectives were created by the distinguished Japanese architect, Kisho Kurokawa. According to these objectives, new buildings were to be located on the left steppe bank of the river Ishim. This new concept assumed the combination of the administrative and representative functions with the residential ones, so that this part of the city could still be lively after office hours in the evening. The plan also assumed creating many recreational devices, parks, greens and fountains. The initial limitations, which resulted from a shortage of water, were overcome thanks to opening an arm of the Irtysh-Karaganda Channel in 2002 (originally built in 1974). In this new situation, the name of the city began to be contested. It was concluded that a modern, dynamic city should not be called “White Grave” anymore. That is how the president Nazarbayev recalls this time:

While the relocation brought about some contrasting opinions, later no one doubted one thing – the name Akmola should be changed! There were various ideas (...), including Kazakhstan or even Nursultan. And then, one night I had an epiphany-Astana. A Capital is a Capital and in all languages it should sound equally light and comprehensive²².

The “epiphany” of the president soon became an appropriate decree, based on which, in 1998 the capital of Kazakhstan was called Astana, a capital called the Capital²³.

²² N. Nazarbayev, *Kazachstańska droga*, p. 303.

²³ The discussion on the name change is ongoing. The servile members of the parliament sometimes come back to the concept of “Nursultan” or even “Nazarbayev”. Recently,

Figure 1 The renovated old apartment building in the old quarter of Astana, photo: by Author



In the last years of the 20th century the capital investments moved to the left bank of the Ishim. People began to call the right bank of Astana the Old City. It is also there where big efforts were put so that its rather harsh image did not contrast too much with the modern left bank of Astana. This was done by the works on the front walls – putting new concrete panels on the front and top walls of the old residential buildings. Their forms respond to the old, world-known architecture styles or Kazakh ornaments. Unfortunately, in most cases this is the only restoration work done to those buildings. With the exception of the façade, other parts of the buildings have not been improved – neither in terms of standards nor aesthetics.

more and more often the concept of “Ak Orda” has been emerging, but this already is a name of the official residence of the president.

Thanks to an enormous financial expenditure within the last few years, a new, almost futuristic Astana has emerged. Logically and sensibly designed city space gained a modern ring road with some modern, cleverly designed junctions. Some new buildings have also been built. The best architects have been invited to design them, and thanks to huge financial capabilities they have been able to realise their vision. Naturally, the only visions which would be realised were those which would find the approval of the president Nazarbayev. The most stunning projects were realised by the distinguished British architect, Norman Foster.

From the beginning of its independence, one of the biggest problems that the young, multi-ethnic and multi-denominational state had to face was to build a political nation, creating full identification of the state with its citizens, regardless of ethnicity or religion. It is an extremely hard task, and the process of achieving it, even when the circumstances are favourable, is not possible within the span of one generation. In a complex Kazakh reality it is not easy to find the ideas and symbols which would be equally important to the nomads and settlers, Muslims and Christians.

After years of fruitless quests, the capital finally started to become a symbol of the new state and a matter of pride for its citizens. The city's symbols are clear to everyone, which all Kazakhs can call their own. President Nazarbayev is proactively imposing on Astana the future role of an ideological capital of Eurasia. Reference to the Eurasian community and adjusting it to the new geopolitical situation in Kazakhstan has a chance to integrate the community of this country and, at the same time, satisfy the need to belong to a great supranational community that emerged after the demise of the large Soviet state.

At the moment we can only observe the shaping of the physical infrastructure; the expected social changes are in the initial stages. This is the context in which we have to look at the current construction of the "Capital of the Future". It has to be noted that both in terms of spatial organization and architecture of the new capital some more or less clear idea can be identified. The majority of outsiders emphasize eclecticism, monumentality and ostentation, which are the result of the megalomania of the president who is undoubtedly responsible for such an image of the city²⁴. We can agree with most of these opinions. However, we have to look at them considering their role and the taste of local inhabitants. Along with

²⁴ Some people see the arrangement of the city and its buildings as masonic in disguise; *Sinistar Sites - Astana, Kazakhstan*, <http://vigilantcitizen.com/sinistersites/sinister-sites-astana-khazakhstan/> (access: 20.11.2012).

sophisticated (in terms of shape) multi-story skyscrapers, there are buildings with Chinese-style roofs or buildings that look like Moscow's socialist realistic palaces or the Warsaw Palace of Culture. Marcin Kula notices that the new capital was supposed to express the rejection of the Soviet model of development, but he wonders if it really had departed from that. According to him, the project of the new capital was "a bit Soviet due to its monumentality and pharaoh-style"²⁵. I think that the Soviet stigma cannot be really imposed on a whole project of the new capital. Megalomania is characteristic for projects of other new capitals, which are not burdened with the Soviet past. On the other hand, the fact that the "Moscow Palace of

Culture" was built supports M. Kula's thesis that despite the declarations, it was not possible to break from the Soviet style, at least in terms of aesthetics. I am likely to think that the decision to build such a "Moscow" building was not aesthetical but symbolic. For many inhabitants of Kazakhstan "Moscow" is associated, also in terms of architecture, with the superregional capital, power and authority. Therefore, there should be some room for it as well, just as there is some for a Chinese pagoda.

A huge construction, 97-metre high Baiterek Tower (designed by N. Foster) has also become one of the national symbols²⁶. The large, supporting part of the building symbolises a tree trunk. In its crown there is

Figure 2. Chinese-style building in the center of Astana, photo: by Author



²⁵ M. Kula, *Przeprowadzki stolic*, p.11.

²⁶ Number 97 is supposed to be the symbol of the year when the capital was relocated to Astana – 1997.

Figure 3. "Moscow"-style building in Astana, photo: by Author



a large, golden bowl symbolising an egg – sun, laid by the legendary bird, Sumruk. According to the legend, every year, this holy bird, lays a golden egg (symbolising the sun) in the crown of the tree, which is then eaten by the dragon. In spite of that, Sumruk, year after year, lays another egg so that the sun can be reborn. It is worth noting that this part of the Kazakh legend, in many variations is known not only among the Turkish people, but also among many Indo-Europeans. In different mythologies, Kazakh's Sumruk is known as the Iranian Simurg or Fenix, as well as the Slavic Fire Bird or Rarog. It has to be noted that the idea to promote this universal mythological symbol and elevating it to the status of national symbol of the new capital and also the informal symbol of the multiethnic state. The image of the tree of life, Baiterek, is commonly exploited; it is also printed on the Kazakh banknotes. According to Nazarbayev:

Baiterek embodies three philosophical elements: Earth, Life and Heaven. Baiterek is for the Kazakhs and their capital the symbol, just like Red Square is for Moscow and the Statue of Liberty is for New York. It has at the same time philosophical, political and historical significance²⁷.

²⁷ N. Nazarbayev, *Kazachstańska droga*, p. 304.

Figure 4. Bäjterek Tower, photo: by Author



Figure 5. Kazakh banknote with the image of Bäjterek tower and the palm of President Nazarbayev



The dome of gold and glass is a great vantage point to admire both the city and further process of the “urbanization of the steppe”²⁸. In the centre of the dome, which is richly decorated with some traditional ornaments, there is a mould of the right hand of the first president of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev. The tradition of touching it and making a wish has become popular. It is a clear manifesto of the stimulation of the cult of an individual and almost sacralises the power of the leader of the nation – Elbasy²⁹.

²⁸ The phrase “urbanisation of the steppe” is borrowed from the article of D. Markowska, who used it in reference to socialist changes in Mongolia; see: D. Markowska, *Urbanizacja stepu*, Studia mongolskie, Biblioteka Etnografii Polskiej, nr 19, Ossolineum, Wrocław, 1969.

²⁹ This title was officially given to Nazarbayev based on the decision of the Senate, on December 14th, 2011, on the 20th anniversary of gaining independence by Kazakhstan.

Figure 6. A Kazakh woman by the Nazarbayev's handprint, photo: by Author



Meaningful in its shape and modern in construction is also Khan Shatyr, the Tent of Khan. This monumental construction in the shape of a tent is a modern shopping and entertainment centre. On the highest floor there is a beach with seawater, sand and real palm trees. The building, which has an area of ten football pitches and is 150 metres high, was opened on July 7, 2010 on the president's 70-birthday anniversary.

Among many other buildings, the 77-metre high pyramid – the Palace of Peace and Conciliation (another work of Norman Foster) is also worth mentioning. It was opened in 2006. The building was created as a place to host meetings, foster dialogue and to foster cooperation between international religious leaders. The idea is supposed to promote Kazakhstan as a global leader of a multi-faith agreement. There has been two such meetings so far. Underground in this extravagant building is an opera with state of the art equipment, great acoustics and 1,500 seats.

The city's authorities have also paid great attention to the so-called "small architecture". In the city, apart from the large monuments of more or less famous heroes, there are also many smaller, lighter sculptures based on the folk art. Enlarged copies of traditional Kazakh jewellery³⁰ are used as decoration and blend tastefully with the city.

³⁰ It is probably the idea of the current mayor of Astana, Imangali Tasmagambetov, who is a distinguished specialist and collector of the folk art. He is also the author of a few valuable publications on this topic.

Figure 7. Khan Shatyr [free source: www.shearydi.com]



Figure 8. Pyramid, photo: by Author



Figure 9. A copy of a ring from the west of Kazakhstan used as an element of landscape architecture, photo: by Author



Undoubtedly, many new buildings, which will impress the world, will be built here in the years to come, especially since Astana is the host of the World Exposition, Expo 2017.

Even the biggest sceptics who doubted the success of the enterprise (relocating the capital, developing it and giving it supranational character) admit that those objectives have been, not only achieved, but also exceeded. What favoured it was the situation on the oil market (of which Kazakhstan is an important exporter) and the ambition and determination of president Nazarbayev. Within less than twenty years, he has managed to build a super modern, capital city, of which most Kazakhs, no matter their ethnic origin, are proud, and which is visited by tourists from all over the world. Tour guides and numerous information plates skilfully convey knowledge about the history, symbols and the importance of the capital.

However, looking at Astana only considering town-planning solutions and architecture would be far too simplistic. As geographer Leon Yacher rightfully claims: "The city was built to impress. And it does so, but the people also have to live in it"³¹.

³¹ L. Yacher, "Kazakhstan", p. 1008.

What matters just as much are the inhabitants; the community has bonded in many different ways. It is difficult to talk about the integrated community of this city. Its turbulent development to a great extent probably destroyed many traditional relations that had created the community of “pre-capital” Akmola. This located in a large steppe metropolis has not been the subject of any proper anthropological analysis on creating a new community. This will be a hard and a long process. The massive flow of new inhabitants fosters conflicts between the “old *zhuz*” and the people who take privileged positions. The non-native inhabitants, who used to be a majority have become a minority and have felt increasing social discomfort. Compared to 1989 when the Kazakhs were only 17.5% of the population, they comprised 63.4% in 2009³². It is possible that the flow of Kazakhs from the south, mainly the members of the old *zhuz* will revive tribal conflicts.

A significant part of the new inhabitants are middle and top managers, who moved to Astana because they had to, due to their occupation or in order to develop their careers. Usually they have not planned to stay long, returning to Almaty in the south, once their office is over, to rejoin their families, homes and businesses. What is important to this category of inhabitants is the emotional bond with the environment they come from. The state of temporality, living “part-time” (although usually in very comfortable conditions) favours some pathological behaviours, such as increasing prostitution³³, revival or more or less visible polygyny³⁴ and the so-called temporary marriages. Young, well educated (mostly western) people working in administration, art or science have and probably will have a stronger relationship with the new capital. To these people the authorities of Astana give a once of a lifetime career opportunity, which would not be available in the “Southern Capital”.

It is hard to say whether Astana will really become, not only the capital of this great country, but also a true heart of Eurasia (as the president Nazarbayev wants to see it). It depends on a few political factors: how well

³² B. Dietz, K. Gatskova, A. Schimillen, *Migration and Remittances in Kazakhstan: First Evidence from Household Survey*, Arbeiten aus dem Osteuropa-Institut Regensburg, Working Papers No.304, November 2011, p. 10.

³³ *W Astane nashli celyi “raion krasnykh fonarei”*, www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1367289900 [access date: 30.04.2013]

³⁴ Recently the problem of legalizing polygyny has been brought up in the mass media. The bill has been put forward to be discussed by the parliament.

Nazarbayev's concept of New Eurasia will be understood in Europe and Asia, and whether his successor will continue his work.

Furthermore, there is also a question whether (once the investment boom is over) there would be enough financial means (in case the country runs out of oil or the economic situation changes) to maintain this extremely costly infrastructure, created in a very difficult climate.

I do not agree with the pessimist forecasts of some specialists who claim that due to hard weather conditions poor quality of construction and building materials and also (what has to be taken into account in the future) possible financial constraints, the life of this "City of the Future" will be short. However, let us believe that this urbanised part of the steppe will remain a source of pride for many more generations of Kazakhstanis.

Marek Gawęcki – received his M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in ethnology at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland. He worked at the Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology of Adam Mickiewicz University and then, between 1994 and 2000, was the first ambassador of Poland in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. He currently works as professor at the Institute of Eastern Studies of Adam Mickiewicz University and is a director of the Centre for Central Asian Studies at AMU. His interests focus on political anthropology and ethnic relations in post-Soviet countries of Central Asia. He conducted fieldwork in Afghanistan in 1976 and in Kazakhstan between 1900 and 2000. Member of the Committee of Ethnological Sciences Polish Academy of Sciences (elected 2012). He published several books and articles on the topics of his research, e.g.: *Wieś środkowego i północnego Afganistanu: Tradycja i próby modernizacji* [*The Village of Central and Northern Afghanistan: Tradition and the Attempts at Modernisation*, 1983] and *Kazachstańscy Polacy* [*The Poles of Kazakhstan*, 1996].