

## **Almaty as a New Kazakh City: *Kazakhization* of the Urban Spaces after the Independence**

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The paper focuses on the city of Almaty, with the aim of enquiring on the urban community after the collapse of the Soviet Union and after the new nationalistic political address lead to the *kazakhization* of physical and symbolic spaces. The emphasis put on Kazakh national elements has not produced big conflicts, like in the neighbouring republics. Kazakhstan has known indeed relative prosperity and development.

A former Russian colonial city, Almaty has been a Soviet and a Kazakhstani capital, losing its status in 1998. In the Soviet period, a new urban Russian-speaking community was forming and identifying itself more and more with the *Soviet citizen*. Such development, together with affirmative action politics, transformed the Kazakhs themselves. The new Kazakh Soviet citizens had survived, although with great losses, a violent sedentarisation of their nomad communities, and repression. During the years, the new Kazakh urban community forming in Alma-Ata, remained a minority but grew aware of their new position as titular people of a republic. In the late Soviet period, more and more Kazakhs arrived from small towns and rural areas, mainly to study, and many of them made a career in the city, becoming part of the Soviet urban society, as well as administrative and political elite. After 1991, the economic crisis and social chaos caused by the sudden collapse of a political, social and economic system, lead to the massive emigration of European minorities, in particular educated cadres. At the same time, some new city areas (*rayony*) originated after impoverished rural Kazakhs settled on the free land around the city, causing social distress and disputes with the local authority. A constant penetration of Kazakhs in the administration and in the *rayony*, run parallel to the removal of some Soviet monuments and the substitution of Soviet street names with “more Kazakh” ones.

The rural Kazakhs appear to be different from the urban ones. They better represent the concept of *being Kazakh*, as promoted by the State, as they know better Kazakh than Russian and are more tied to their traditions than the sovietised/russified urban ones. Despite all this, they are perceived by the urban Kazakhs in a negative way.

Studying the demographic and urban changes in the city helps understand the effects of the new policy on the Kazakhstani society and the meaning of ethnicity for the minorities and the majorities living in the city.