

The Diaspora Policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan

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Understanding the politics of the Kazakh diaspora in the Republic of Kazakhstan requires knowledge of the general features of the diaspora and irredenta. The latter is an ethnic group that occupies its own lands, but as a result of conquests or annexations of territories their homeland is now under the rule of foreign governments.¹ The global Kazakh population in 2009–2010 exceeded 14 million. Table 1 shows more than 10 million living in Kazakhstan,² 1.250 million in China,³ 870,000 in Russia,⁴ nearly 900,000 in Uzbekistan,⁵ 145,000 in Mongolia, 15,000 in Turkey, and the remainder in more than 43 countries.⁶

Ranking	Country	Official data	Field study data 2007–2009
1	Kazakhstan	10,301,165	10,301,165
2	China	1,250,500	1,413,500
3	Uzbekistan	899,195	1.3-1.5 million
4	Russia	870,000	1.2 million
5	Mongolia	145,000	
6	Turkey		15,000
7	43 other countries		

Table 1. Global Kazakh population 2009-2010

Based on several statistical studies and my own research, Table 1 shows that among the 4 million Kazakhs living abroad, approximately 800,000 are the Kazakh diaspora. The remainder are people of the irredenta who have not so much left their homeland as been separated from the main body of their ethnic group by state borders. Kazakhs are both the irredenta and diaspora in Russia, China and Uzbekistan. In Russia, the Kazakh diaspora lives in Moscow and St Petersburg. The irredenta has taken form in the provinces (*oblasti*) of Astrakhan, Kurgan, Volgograd, Orenburg, Omsk, Cheliabinsk and Gorno-Altai, territories incorporated into Russia as a result of the colonial

¹ Milton J. Esman, "Ethnic Pluralism and International Relations," *Canadian Review of Studies in Nationalism* 17, no. 1-2 (1990), pp. 83-88.

² *Demographical Annual Report of Kazakhstan in 2009: Statistical Reports* (Astana: Agency on Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2010) (in Russian); *Kazakhstan in the years of Independence* (Almaty: Agency on Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2007) (in Russian); *Ethno-Demographical Annual Report of Kazakhstan: Statistical Reports* (Almaty: Agency on Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2006) (in Russian).

³ <http://www.stats.gov.cn>

⁴ *Demoscope* № 439 – 440. 18-31 October 2010 [<http://demoscope.ru>] (in Russian).

⁵ *Population of Uzbekistan 2002-2006: Statistical collection* (Tashkent: State Committee on Statistics, Republic of Uzbekistan, 2007) (in Russian).

⁶ The Data of the World Association of the Kazakhs.

conquests since the sixteenth century. Further division of the Kazakh people occurred in the first decade of the twentieth century, particularly during the early Soviet period, with the national-state territorial demarcation between Kazakhstan and Central Asia in 1925.⁷ In China, while the Kazakh diaspora has settled in the central regions, the irredenta lives in the Sinkiang-Uighur autonomous region. The latter situation is a result of historical events in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, including territorial delimitation of Central Asia between Russian and Chinese empires in the second part of the nineteenth century.⁸

According to Gabriel Sheffer, “Modern diaspora are ethnic minority groups of migrant origins residing and acting in host countries but maintaining strong sentimental and material links with their countries of origin – their homelands.”⁹ The Kazakh diaspora is not a large one – they are just small groups of ethnic Kazakhs in host countries in Western Europe and North America. This is of little concern to those who live in Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan, where their small presence has enabled them to show a desire for joint settlements and ask for relevant policies from their host countries. Although the Kazakh diaspora as an ethnic minority has never occupied a politically significant place in host countries, this does not preclude them from thriving there economically and socially. Drawing on the nomadic life of ancestral Kazakhs through the millennia, they have facilitated their social-psychological and physiological capability to perceive the surrounding world and to adapt themselves to the highly competitive multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious conditions.

The Kazakhs’ Labour, Cultural and Trade Diaspora in the West¹⁰

The Kazakhs have dispersed to form worldwide diaspora mainly from Kazakhstan, China, Turkey and Afghanistan. Since the 1960s, the diaspora has been characterized by the voluntary migration of individuals. When this new trend emerged, some people were part of the Turkish labour migration to Western Europe. These Kazakhs had worked primarily as manual labourers before they climbed up to achieve higher social and educational status in host countries. Today the Kazakh diaspora in the West consists of office employees in large corporations, hotels and other service industries. Many run their own businesses, with approximately one-third managing manufacturing companies in Western Europe and the United States. By the 1990s, many Kazakh scholars, artists and musicians left Kazakhstan to work in the West at the invitation of various governments.

Despite social, economic, legal, cultural and educational terms differences within the Kazakh diaspora, there are some common features of it in Western countries. They are an ethnic minority

⁷ Gulnara Mendikulova, “The Kazakh Irredenta in Russia (History and Modernity),” *Eurasian Community* 8 (1995), pp. 70-80 (in Russian).

⁸ Gulnara Mendikulova, *The Historical Fates of the Kazakh Diaspora: Background and Development* (Almaty: Gylym, 1997) (in Russian).

⁹ Gabriel Sheffer, ed., *Modern Diasporas in International Politics* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), p. 3.

¹⁰ For further details, see Gulnara Mendikulova, *The Kazakh Diaspora: History and Modernity* (Almaty: World Association of Kazakhs, 2006) (in Russian).

in each host country, usually numbering no more than a few hundred families. They do not, and have never, played a significant role in the politics of the countries where they settled. Living in urban areas has provided them with good opportunities for jobs and education. They also have remarkable adaptation capability, allowing them to thrive in new climatic and social environments, including quick acquisition of fluency in the host country language. Many are also tri-lingual or multi-lingual. Those from Kazakhstan speak Kazakh, Russian and their host country language; those from China speak Chinese, Kazakh and their host country language; and those from Turkey speak Turkish, Kazakh and their host country language.

While urban conditions are to some degree unfavourable for the preservation of their ethnic identity, these small Kazakh communities have strongly embodied this in their daily activities, celebrations and customs. Given the possibility to participate in Turkish associations in the host countries before 1991, they had not thought it necessary to have their own organizations for improving economic, social and political-legal conditions. Nor did they think it necessary to do so for transmitting important cultural heritage to younger members of their communities, and further developing national culture in alien environments. After 1991, the diaspora has fostered strong sentimental and maternal links with the Republic of Kazakhstan, which would have been impossible during the Soviet period.

Which aspect is the most important to the people of the Kazakh diaspora: assimilation, acculturation, preservation of ethnic identity, or repatriation? The diaspora has attempted to preserve and develop its ethnic identity while living as aliens in the West and longed for a return back to Kazakhstan. First steps were taken within Kazakh families: they taught their children to speak Kazakh and know their traditions, and mono-ethnic marriages were encouraged. While Kazakhs in Western Europe and North America live in small family units consisting of one married couple and their children, those in Turkey and other Eastern countries prefer to live with their extended family. Here parents live with their unmarried children and married sons, daughters-in-law and grandchildren. Given the high cost of housing and land, it is reasonable for large extended Kazakh families to live together. In Turkey, it is more economical and convenient to share a household, especially when one's married son and family do not have enough means to purchase a house.

The preservation of the Kazakh identity and repatriation became increasingly attainable options after Kazakhstan's declaration of independence in 1991. Some decided to leave the West to end the process of acculturation. Others who decided to stay began to establish Kazakh cultural centres. The Kazakh Cultural Centre was established, for instance, in the United Kingdom in 1992. During 1995 and 1996, Kazakhstan's State Program of Support for the Kazakh Diaspora, which I took part in, was aimed at the development and consolidation of multi-faceted communications with the Kazakh diaspora and irredenta. In January 1998, the government raised the issue of the creation of a European cultural centre for the diaspora. Kazakh representatives from many European countries were also involved in the forum, which resolved to found a cultural centre for European Kazakhs in Cologne, Germany. The process continues to grow. In autumn 2010, an ethnic Kazakh, Mr Berlin Irishev, an exemplary person and political figure, established the

Kazakhstani Association in France. I congratulated him and the new association, one that accepts all Kazakhstan citizens as well as ethnic Kazakhs. This is a very timely and useful organization to accommodate and develop a new strategy for Kazakhstan's diaspora policy.

Kazakhstan Meets the Kazakh Diaspora

After the declaration of independence, Kazakhstan began to invite the highest representatives of the Kazakh diaspora and irredenta to convene Kurultays (assemblies) with a view toward coordinating joint activities of the Republic of Kazakhstan and Kazakhs abroad. On 29 September 1992, when the First World Kurultay of Kazakhs took place in Almaty, delegations came from Turkey, Germany, France, Sweden, Norway, Mongolia, Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.¹¹ Delegates from the People's Republic of China could not participate in the forum as the Chinese authorities did not allow them. The significance of the First World Kurultay should be more emphasized because a variety of historical fates had deprived the Kazakh diaspora and irredenta of the opportunity to visit the land of their ancestors for decades. The Kurultay resolved to reinforce the multilateral communications of the Republic and foreign Kazakhs, declaring that the young state of Kazakhstan was a protector of all Kazakhs worldwide. It was this Kurultay that decided to establish the World Association of Kazakhs (WAK) as an organization coordinating activities of all Kazakh communities worldwide. It also aims to investigate historical, ethnographical, cultural and linguistic questions, as well as the present situation of the Kazakh diaspora and irredenta and various state policies towards them.

With N.A. Nazarbayev, president of the Republic of Kazakhstan, as the chairman of its Presidium, WAK engages in cultural, educational and business activities. For example, in 1994 a WAK business centre opened in Almaty to further the many facets of WAK activities. This was made possible by sponsorship support from Kazakh business elites in Turkey, Russia and other countries. In the same year, WAK, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, invited 40 Kazakhs living abroad to study in Kazakhstan. The following year, 150 students from the Kazakh diaspora studied there. Pre-training and training courses (e.g., language and adaptation measures) were created especially for these students. Young Kazakhs from Turkey, China, Mongolia, Iran and Russia have been able to begin their study in Almaty, Jambul, Turkestan and Taldykorgan. On 18 May 2005, WAK established the Centre for Students within its structure. At that time, the centre discussed issues around the study and living conditions among the students from the Kazakh diaspora and irredenta.

In the 1990s, smaller Kurultays took place in Russia, China, Mongolia and Uzbekistan, where the largest Kazakh communities exist. These smaller forums served as a preparatory work for the Second World Kurultay of the Kazakhs. On 20 July 2002, the prime minister of the Republic of Kazakhstan, I.N. Tasmagambetov, signed the Cabinet Minister's decision about holding this event. The decision stipulated that a governmental commission be formed to take the planned measures.

¹¹ The Archive of the World Association of the Kazakhs.

The Second World Kurultay of the Kazakhs was held in Turkestan on 23-24 October 2002 where, according to WAK, more than 400 delegates came from 34 countries, with the largest number from Uzbekistan.¹² A distinctive feature of this particular Kurultay was the presence of Kazakhs from China for the first time. The main agenda discussions were about creating a new government program of support for Kazakh compatriots living abroad. Issues about the repatriation of Kazakhs wishing to return to their historical homeland were of special note. After the Kurultay, approximately 800 Kazakh families, solely from Mongolia, expressed the desire to return. In recent years, more and more Kazakhs are coming back. In 2004 and 2005, a limit of 15,000 was placed on the number of returning families, and approximately 3 million Kazakhs living abroad today are said to have an intention to return to Kazakhstan.

In 2005, WAK was involved in preparations for the Third World Kurultay of Kazakhs in Astana. On 1 August 2005, with the prime minister's signature, the government of the Republic of Kazakhstan passed Decision No. 797 about the preparation and hosting of this event. On 28-30 September 2005, over 300 delegates from 32 countries participated in the Kurultay, as well as more than 200 representatives from all regions of Kazakhstan and the cities of Almaty and Astana. There was also a significant media presence. Many young people, business people, scientists, teachers, doctors, students and artists attended the Kurultay. These people are famous and important figures whose activities in social, economic, cultural and educational spheres are well known in each host country of residence. Among the Kazakh delegates from abroad, there were 20 doctors of science, five members of parliament, one government minister, eight heads of regional and rural administrations, and 39 chairpersons of Kazakh national cultural centres.

The efficiency of the Kurultay was clearly evident from the first day with four sections dealing with the following questions: 1) the cultural development among the Kazakh diaspora; 2) the creation of conditions for training the people of the diaspora in Kazakhstan; 3) realizing the investment through repatriating the diaspora to their historical homeland; and 4) the migration policies and *Oralman* (Kazakh returnee) difficulties. Representatives from the following government agencies attended these workshops: the Ministry of Culture, Information and Sport, Ministry of Education and Science, Migration Committee at the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of Population, as well as the Ministry of Industry and Trade Work. Naturally, hot debates arose over many issues.

The decree of the president of the Republic of Kazakhstan announced on 21 November 2005, No 1673 "A State Program of Support for Compatriots Living Abroad, 2005-2007," is an important document heralding a new stage of the development of mutual relations between the Kazakhstan state and the Kazakh diaspora. Analysing various aspects of the modern development of worldwide Kazakhs communities, it clarified basic directions of the program and the way it is implemented. It declared as one of the main goals "the creation of a state system of social and economic, legal protection and support for compatriots living abroad, as a component of the united

¹² The Archive of the World Association of the Kazakhs.

Kazakh nation.” To ensure its success, the president of the Republic of Kazakhstan recommended specific targets: 1) improving a strong legal base for the support of compatriots living abroad; 2) preparing for the adjustment of intensive economic contacts with them; 3) establishing regular cultural-humanitarian communications with them; 4) providing them with information support; 5) creating conditions for their training in educational institutions of the Republic of Kazakhstan; and 6) assisting the consolidation of the Kazakh diaspora and irredenta. Based on this accepted state program, WAK planned a number of long-term actions directed at the consolidation of the Kazakh diaspora and irredenta in science, education, cultural-spiritual and social and economic development, as well as in the public life of Kazakh cultural centres. These actions will serve as favourable conditions for the preservation of the ethnic identity of Kazakhs living abroad, promoting their study and preservation of the native language and Kazakhstan history, and familiarising them with national traditions and culture.

Kazakhstan’s attempts to gather historical and contemporary information about the worldwide Kazakh diaspora and irredenta have encountered several difficulties. First, their total number is not clear. The official data released from countries with a Kazakh population tend to underestimate their number. In some countries this is due to ethnic minority policies, and in others it is simply that an accurate statistical census about Kazakhs has not been undertaken. Concerning research conditions, we have had both achievements and failures. In November 2004, WAK arranged a meeting with experts studying difficulties faced by foreign Kazakhs where those present (including scholars Gulnara Mendikulova and Makash Tatimov and journalist Uakap Kydyrkhan) discussed technical issues around research conditions, proposed future academic agendas, and made varied recommendations and statements. The meeting resolved to found the Research Centre of Diaspora Studies within WAK. Thus we created a new field in Kazakhstan social science, Diaspora Studies, with specialists examining the history of the Kazakh diaspora and irredenta worldwide (G. Mendikulova), in Uzbekistan (K. Koblandin),¹³ China (B. Atantyaeva¹⁴ and A. Samaev¹⁵), and European and Arabic countries.¹⁶ Thanks to the State Program of the Formation of

¹³ Kalybek Koblandin and Gulnara Mendikulova, *History and Contemporary Development of the Kazakhs of Uzbekistan* (Almaty: DKK, 2009) (in Kazakh).

¹⁴ Gulnara Mendikulova and Bakhyt Atantaeva, *History of Migrations between Kazakhstan and China in 1860-1960s* (Almaty: SaGa, 2008) (in Russian); Bakhyt Atantaeva, “Kazakhs in the States of Eurasia: Contemporary Analyze of Ethnic Politics,” *Center of Eurasia*, 4 (17) (2009), pp. 18-22. (in Russian); Bakhyt Atantaeva, “Border Factors of Migrations in the Central-Asian Region at the End of the 19th Century,” *V mire nauki, kul'tury, obrazovaniia* 1 (2011) (in Russian); and many others.

¹⁵ Aidar Samaev, “Creation of the Kazakh Irredenta in China,” *Center of Eurasia* 1 (2009) (in Russian); Aidar Samaev, “The Kazakh Societies abroad and the Problems of Their Repatriation,” *Proceedings of the International Conference “Citizen, Society, State: Timely Questions of Interaction”* (Semipalatinsk, 2006), pp. 264-268 (in Russian); and others.

¹⁶ Gulnara Mendikulova, “The Kazakh Diasporas and Irredentas,” *World Turkish Forum: Turkish Council, Turkish Diaspora and Socio-Economic Cooperation* (Istanbul: TASAM, 2012), pp. 203-223 (in Turkish); Gulnara Mendikulova, “Kazakh Women: The Impact of Three Different Socio-Political Systems within Two Centuries,” in *Gender Politics in Central Asia. Historical Perspectives and Current Living Conditions of Women* (Köln: Bohlau Verlag, 2008), pp. 21-35; Gulnara Mendikulova, “Kazakhstan’s Relation with the Gulf,” in *Russian and CIS Relations with the Gulf Region: Current Trends in Political and Economic Dynamics* (Dubai: Gulf Research Center), pp. 183-211 (with co-author); and others.

the National Idea, we had a marvellous opportunity in 2007-2009 to conduct various researches including field works and the collection of archival documents in several countries. Unfortunately, the worldwide financial crisis diminished funds for conducting further necessary field works and research trips to collect relevant material. In 2013, we are expecting to receive new financial support from the Ministry of Education and Science of Republic of Kazakhstan.

The substantial diversity of the Kazakh diaspora itself to some extent hampers Kazakhstan's endeavour to integrate the dispersed communities. These Kazakhs hailed mainly from Kazakhstan, China, Turkey and Afghanistan where they acquired different languages, scripts and cultural norms. A variety of memories around emigration and the divided frontiers of their historical motherland make it difficult for them to communicate with each other. The difference in languages and alphabets especially works as an obstacle to spread literature and printed material from Kazakhstan to the Kazakh communities in the countries concerned. While Kazakhstan uses the Cyrillic alphabet, Kazakhs in Turkey write in Latin script and those in China, Afghanistan and Iran in Arabic script.

Nonetheless, the Kazakh diaspora has not only survived, but thrived in alien environments, striving to preserve their ethnic identity, which has been all the more promoted by their growing connections to the historical homeland. The situation for Kazakhs changed after the declaration of the sovereignty and independence of the Republic of Kazakhstan, which led the diaspora and irredenta to take huge pride in belonging to the Kazakh nation. Even from Western Europe, some families are planning to move to Kazakhstan and settle there permanently. Since the 1990s, the increasing number of Kazakh associations has been established in different countries, facilitating regular unions and arranging joint cultural and sport events. This collectivity enables the Kazakh diaspora to maintain their strong ethnic identity.

The Republic of Kazakhstan is responsible not only for the consolidation and unification of its multi-ethnic citizens, but also for the integration of the Kazakhs dispersed around the world. WAK is the embodiment of Kazakhstan's endeavour to forge the highest level of cooperation with the latter in all spheres of life. Its activities are appreciated by Kazakh communities abroad, such as facilitating Kazakhstan policy about the diaspora and irredenta. Kazakhstan's interactions with these foreign Kazakhs have been developed to include: 1) the study of their history and ancestral ability to live in various climatic, social, economic and cultural conditions; 2) state protectionism for compatriots within and outside Kazakhstan; 3) the organization of repatriation; 4) assistance in humanitarian help (sending textbooks, literature and periodicals in the Kazakh language to host countries); and 5) the creation and development of multilateral assistance to Kazakh cultural centres abroad.¹⁷ Despite certain modifications, over time the main goal remains unchanged – to improve the living conditions of *Oralmans* in their historical homeland and Kazakhs living abroad.

¹⁷ Gulnara Mendikulova, "Timely Questions of the Diaspora Studies in Kazakhstan," *Otan Tarikhi* 3-4 (2000), pp. 37-42; Gulnara Mendikulova, "The Kazakh Diaspora and the Republic of Kazakhstan: Problems and Perspectives," *Kazakhstan-Spektr* 1 (1998), pp. 73-77.