



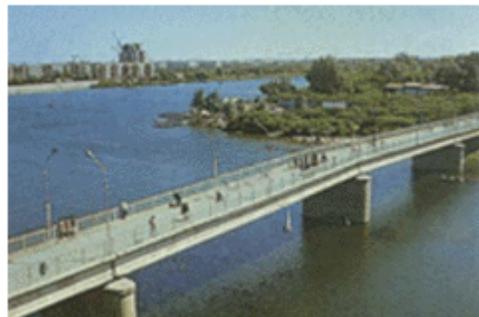
Astana

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In December 1997, the President of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbaev, decrees that the capital of the Republic should be moved from Almaty to Aqmola, a provincial town on the right bank of the Ishim River about a thousand kilometers to the north. Although the decree does not sit well with the legislators and the commercial magnates--they have comfortably centered their private and professional lives on [Almaty](#)--Nazarbaev pushes for the change. He argues that because Almaty is located in a seismic zone, funds earmarked for upgrading and maintaining the capital should not be spent on it. In addition, he argues that Almaty is too distant from the commercial axis that connects present-day Europe with Asia and entrenched enough in Kazakh territory to leave half the population of the republic without a capital. Before long, Nazarbaev wins and Almaty loses its status as capital; embassies, main banks, trading centers, and other centers of major activity, however, remain there.

Founded originally in 1824 as a Russian fortress, Akmolinsk (the original name of Astana) grew into a mining town of little importance. But the town's prospects changed in the 1950s, when Nikita Khrushchev chose the region as the location for showcasing his Virgin Lands project. The project, which intended to turn some 155,000 sq. mi. of grazing steppe land around Akmolinsk into corn and wheat farms needed a center. By Khrushchev's decree Akmolinsk was assigned that status. By 1961 an oblast called Tselinograd was formed and Akmolinsk (renamed Tselinograd or Virgin City) became its provincial center.



Tselinograd oblast was a major center of corn and wheat production in the former Soviet Union. It also housed centers for live-stock raising, meat packing, milk, and wool. A mining town, Tselinograd also had an automobile productions factory as well as centers for metallurgy, light food industry, and light construction materials production.



During 1991, after Kazakhstan became independent, the names of a number of streets, well-known squares, and towns reverted back from Russian into their original Kazakh form. Tselinograd's name, too, changed, this time to a Russified Kazakh name, Akmola (Russian uses a "k" for Kazakh "q"). By 1997, Akmola had gained enough prestige to be considered as a future capital. Since the future capital had to have a total Kazakh name, Akmola was changed to Aqmola at that time.

Aqmola is a compound of *ak*, the Kazakh word for "white," and *mola*, meaning "grave." The name can be literally translated as "White Grave," not a desired name for a burgeoning capital city of the future. Thus, in 1998, after a year of residence in Aqmola, Nazarbaev changed the name once more, this time to Astana, the Kazakh word for "capital."

Astana had a population of 281,000 in 1997. The ethnic mix is about 30% Kazakh and 70% Russian, Ukrainian, and German. This latter ethnic group is closely tied to Russia and the Russian culture. Nazarbaev hopes to keep them happy in Kazakhstan by involving them deeper in the socio-political dynamics of the republic and in commerce between Europe and Asia.



As of 1 July 2010, Astana has a population 705,897, of which Kazakhs, Russians, Ukrainians, Tatars and Germans make up 65.2%, 23.8%, 2.9%, 1.7%, 1.5% respectively. Other ethnic groups make up 4.9% of Astana's population

The climate in Astana is one of extremes. It gets very hot and sticky in summer (20 C in June) and freezing cold (-18 C in January) with harsh winds sweeping over the steppe in the winter.

Although the name can be changed by decree, living circumstances cannot. Aqmola has a long way to go before it becomes a functioning *astana* for Kazakhstan. Usually capitals

are moved from one major city to another so that the need for creating an infrastructure does not arise. Other urgent needs do not allow administrators to spend their time and energy on the basic needs of the city. [Tehran](#), a test case for such a move, still suffers the consequences of having become a capital in the late 1800s.



For Astana to become a center of politics and commerce, it needs to install a modern communications system and facilities for generation and distribution of power and water distribution. It needs a sewage disposal as well as a system of transportation to and from Astana. The latter, in present-day terms, requires an international airport with a modern air traffic control system as well as an efficient system of trains and buses. To become a center of culture, Astana needs to add to the few schools, the theater and the museum of Aqmola, new theaters, a symphony hall, and many of the other structures that stayed back in Almaty.

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