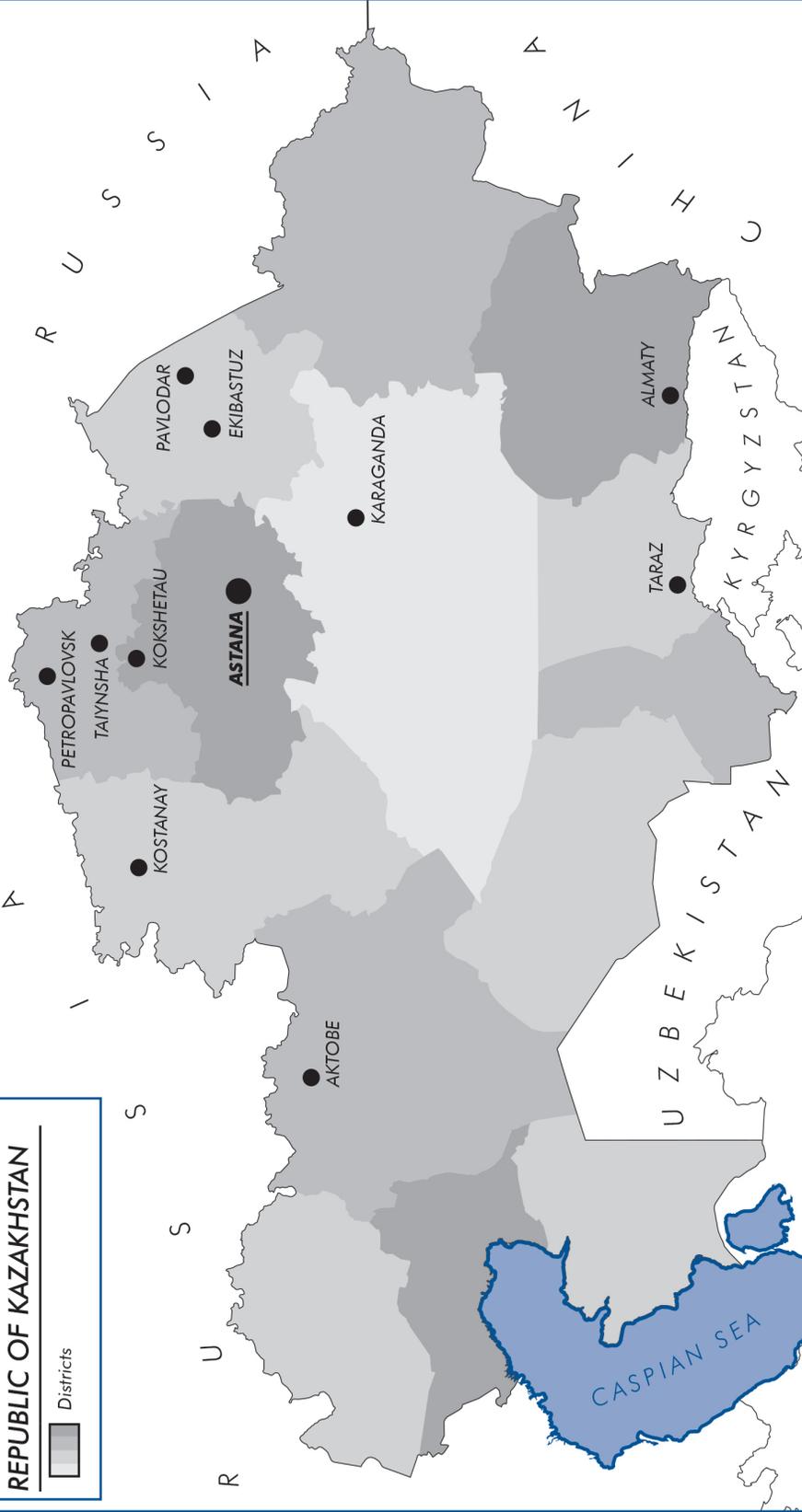


# REPUBLIC OF KAZAKHSTAN

Districts



**Yuriy Serebriansky**

PEN Club Kazakhstan.

ORCID 0000-0002-4585-0725



DOI 10.48261/INRR250704

# THE IMPACT OF ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION ON THE POLISH DIASPORA IN KAZAKHSTAN SINCE 1991

ARTICLES

## **Abstract**

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the political and socio-economic landscape of the post-Soviet republics underwent significant transformation, opening new opportunities for their independent development and the assertion of national identity. At the same time, these newly independent states faced considerable economic challenges resulting from the disintegration of the centrally planned economy of the USSR, coupled with a lack of established external relations with other countries and international organisations. This article examines the impact of the political and economic changes in Kazakhstan since 1991 on the Polish diaspora as part of the country's multiethnic population. The material analyzed in this study includes personal recollections of Poles published in the *Алматы́нский Курьер Полонийны* magazine between 2012 and 2017, as well as

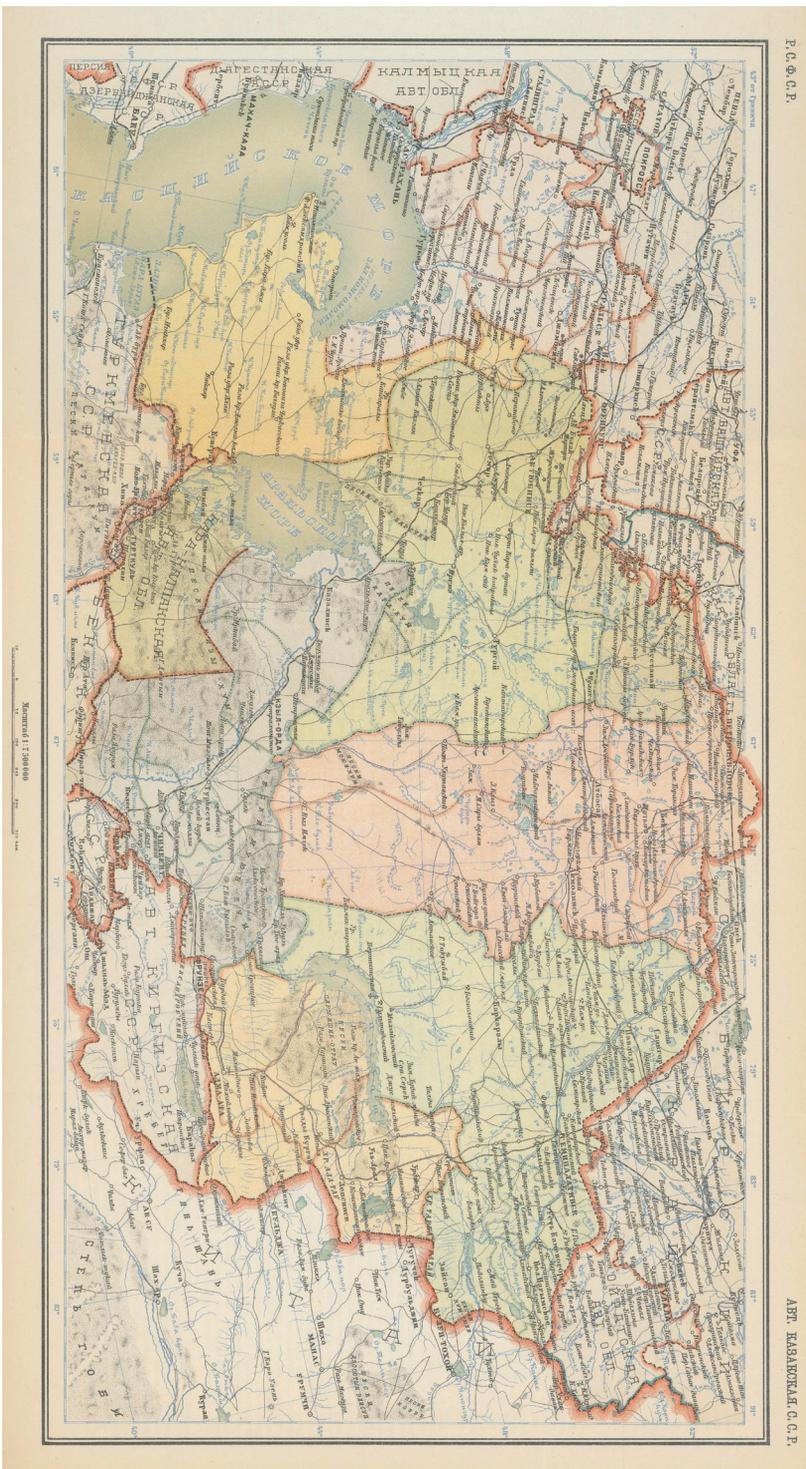
data from a survey conducted among Poles who emigrated from Kazakhstan to Poland for permanent residence since 2015, alongside responses from individuals currently residing in Kazakhstan.

**Keywords:** Demographic policy of Kazakhstan, Polonia in Kazakhstan, Poles in Kazakhstan, Migration process in Kazakhstan, Migration policy in Poland

## Introduction

The Soviet period in the history of the Polish diaspora in Kazakhstan has been thoroughly examined by both Polish and Kazakhstani scholars, including Stanisław Ciesielski, Piotr Hlebowicz, Sławoj Szynkiewicz, K. Iglicka, D. Panto, N. Abuov, S. Mashimbaev, L. Isova, A. Berkimbayeva, and D. Legkiy. The presence of Poles in the territory of present-day Kazakhstan dates back to the period of the Russian Empire; however, the Polish population increased significantly during the Soviet era, primarily due to forced deportations under Stalinist policies. Over these years, Kazakhstani Poles became an integral part of broader Kazakhstani society, forming a distinct Polish diaspora within the country's multi-ethnic framework. Alongside the Poles, numerous other ethnic groups are present – altogether 130, according to the 2021 census conducted by the Bureau of National Statistics – many of them also found themselves in Kazakhstan as a result of mass deportations during the Soviet period.

The presence of a multinational population, with ethnic Kazakhs comprising only 37.82% of the total population at the end of the Soviet period (Serebryanskiy 2020), posed significant challenges to the government of a newly-independent Kazakhstan in 1991 following the dissolution of the USSR. The history of Kazakhstani Poles in the post-Soviet period has also attracted scholarly attention. Notable contributions include the work of Professor Marek Gawęcki, the first Ambassador of the Republic of Poland to Kazakhstan (1994–2000), whose publications such as “Kontakty z ojczyzną a tożsamość Polaków w postsowieckim Kazachstanie” and “Czwarty żuz. Sytuacja nierdzennej ludności w postsowieckim Kazachstanie” have explored the identity and situation of Poles in Kazakhstan after the collapse of the USSR (Gawęcki 2004; Gawęcki 2007). Research on the identity of Kazakhstani Poles has also been conducted by Luba Jakubowska (now Ślósarz) and other scholars (Ślósarz 2011).



Autonomous Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic (1928). Atlas Soyuz  
Sovetskikh Sotsialisticheskikh Respublik. Moscow: Izdanie TsIK SSSR, 1928.  
National Library, Warsaw, Poland

This article examines the impact of Kazakhstan's post-1991 economic and political developments on the lives of Kazakhstani Poles, with a particular focus on the decision-making process between repatriation to the historical homeland and remaining in Kazakhstan. While foundational, most studies on this topic were conducted between 1990 and 1998 and do not fully capture the current situation of the Polish diaspora in Kazakhstan. The present analysis draws on recent data concerning Kazakhstan's economic and demographic conditions, statistical sources, and materials published in the *Алматы́нский Курьер Полонийны* magazine, including personal testimonies and family histories of Kazakhstani Poles published since 2012. In addition, the article presents findings from a survey conducted among ethnic Poles from Kazakhstan, focusing on those who migrated to Poland after 2015 as well as those who chose to remain in Kazakhstan. The survey asked respondents to identify key factors influencing their decisions to either relocate or stay.

The working hypothesis of this study is that, among the factors influencing the migration of Poles from Kazakhstan to Poland since the early years of independence, the most significant has been the economic hardship experienced during the difficult period of Kazakhstan's post-Soviet transformation.

In 1991, the USSR formally ceased to exist. Over the preceding seventy years, several generations had come and gone, yet witnesses to the tragic events of the deportation period remain alive today. The forced deportations of the Stalinist era were the defining historical experience for Kazakhstani Poles, most of whom ended up in modern-day Kazakhstan as a result of these events. Other developments, such as wartime labour mobilisation during World War II and the major Soviet industrial and agricultural campaigns – including the Virgin Lands campaign (*Tselina*) – affected Poles in a similar way to other Soviet citizens. However, the experience of Poles was further shaped by their legal status as special settlers, which imposed severe restrictions until 1956. Like many other forcibly relocated groups – Germans, Koreans, Crimean Tatars, and the peoples of the Caucasus – Poles shared the fate of living in Kazakhstan under constraint and marginalisation. These events occurred against the backdrop of an earlier tragedy – the Kazakh famine, during which ethnic Kazakhs lost approximately a quarter of their population as a result of forced sedentarisation policies (Cameron 2018).

This historical context underpins the formation of the Polish community in Kazakhstan. Despite the trauma of deportation,

Poles became participants in the country's economic development and contributed to the emergence of the Soviet national identity. Throughout these decades, the Polish community managed to preserve many of its cultural traditions and religious practices – though to a lesser extent its language. Polish was not taught in Kazakhstani schools, and many deportees had arrived from Ukraine, where different linguistic dynamics prevailed. According to official census data, there were 34,057 Poles in Kazakhstan in 2009, compared to 35,319 in 2021 (National Composition of the Population of the Republic of Kazakhstan according to the 2009 and 2021 Censuses). Throughout a long period of Kazakhstan's history, Poles have remained and continue to be part of the country's population, with their numbers changing over different periods, as shown in the table below (Keller and Shoshana 2024).

**Table 1. Demographic changes of the Polish diaspora in Kazakhstan across different periods.**

Period	Polish population of Kazakhstan	% of total population
1939	54,809	0.8%
1959	53,102	0.5%
1970	61,400	0.5%
1979	61,100	0.4%
1989	59,400	0.4%
2009	34,057	0.21%
2021	35,319	0.18%

## Materials

The empirical material for this study consists of two main sources. First, the recollections of members of the Polish diaspora published in the *Almatyński Kurier Polonijny* (AKP) magazine between 2012 and 2017 were analysed. Second, data were collected through a survey conducted among ethnic Poles who either emigrated from Kazakhstan to Poland for permanent residence starting in 2015 or who currently reside in Kazakhstan. In total, 26 publications from the AKP magazine were examined. The survey involved eight respondents: four individuals who relocated to Poland and four representatives of the Polish community who chose to remain in Kazakhstan.



Ciuksza family – Polish deportees in Kazakhstan (after 1940). Photo: Institute of National Remembrance Branch in Szczecin Archives, collection of Związek Sybiraków, Branch in Gorzów Wielkopolski, ref. no. Sz 671/1, vol. 4

## Methodology

The study employed both classical and contemporary research methods. Content analysis and the comparative method were used to examine qualitative data derived from personal recollections and testimonies. In addition, quantitative data were processed using statistical analysis methods.

## The Situation of Poles in Kazakhstan in the Early Period of Independence: The Economic Situation in Kazakhstan at the Beginning of the Independence Period

In the initial years following independence, Kazakhstan began the process of forming the core institutions of a sovereign state. In 1991, the country held its first nationwide presidential elections; in 1992, national symbols were officially adopted; and in 1993, a new constitution and national currency were introduced. On 2 March 1992, the Republic of Kazakhstan was unanimously admitted as a member of the United Nations during the 46th session of the UN General Assembly. However, the early years of independence laid

bare the significant challenges facing the country in its transition to sovereignty. Kazakhstan entered a profound economic crisis caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union, resulting in a sharp recession from 1992 to 1994 and extremely high inflation. Between 1990 and 1995, the country's gross domestic product (GDP) declined by 36%, and in 1992, inflation reached a record 3,060%, while approximately 1.6 million people were unemployed.

In response to the crisis, the government initiated a series of economic reforms. In 1997, the development strategy “Kazakhstan 2030” was introduced as a roadmap for long-term national growth. The strategy identified seven priority objectives: national security; internal political stability and national unity; sustainable economic growth; improved health care, education, and social welfare; efficient use of energy resources; infrastructure development – particularly in transport and communications; and the creation of a professional and effective public administration (Mukhamediyev and Temerbulatova 2021). The disintegration of internal economic ties within the centrally planned Soviet economy led to widespread job losses among skilled workers and the suspension or restructuring of large industrial enterprises that had previously produced goods for inter-republic trade. Between 1990 and 1995, real GDP declined by 36% due to the severing of economic links with former Soviet republics, the emigration of ethnic Russians and Germans, the breakdown of production chains, and hyperinflation, which exceeded 1,000% annually from 1992 to 1994 (Felipe and Rhee 2013). According to a report by the Asian Development Bank, Kazakhstan's early post-independence years were marked by substantial economic instability, which in turn affected the country's political and institutional development (Felipe and Rhee 2013). In the 1990s, vast areas of agricultural land in Kazakhstan fell out of use, and only in recent years has agricultural output begun to approach pre-independence levels. Livestock farming, in particular, still remains below those benchmarks (Anderson et al. 2018). Nonetheless, sustained economic growth – driven primarily by the extraction of energy resources and rising household incomes – led to a dramatic reduction in poverty, from 47% to 2.6%, and by 2013, the unemployment rate had declined to 5%.

The sectoral structure of foreign direct investment (FDI) in Kazakhstan demonstrates a strong concentration in the extractive industries. The mining sector accounts for 61.5% of total FDI, with oil and natural gas extraction representing 59.5%, and geological exploration and surveying activities comprising another 21.1%. All

Polish deportees in Kazakhstan, working in the "Stalin" kolkhoz cotton farm (after 1940). Photo: Institute of National Remembrance Branch in Szczecin Archives, collection of Związek Sybiraków, Branch in Gorzów Wielkopolski, ref. no. Sz 671/1, vol. 4

other sectors of the economy collectively receive just over 17% of total FDI, with manufacturing receiving a modest 7.4%. While the influx of foreign investment has contributed positively to Kazakhstan's overall economic development, the uneven sectoral distribution of capital has exacerbated both regional and sectoral disparities. Kazakhstan's heavy reliance on global commodity markets also exposes its economy to significant vulnerability in the face of price fluctuations (Arsakhanova 2005).

One of the major constraints on increasing the output of competitive industrial goods is the severe deterioration of fixed capital assets. Insufficient investment has resulted in the accelerated depreciation of production infrastructure and processing technologies. Existing depreciation regulations do not adequately support the timely replacement of outdated equipment. Consequently, outdated machinery and technologies contribute to high material and energy consumption, elevated production costs, and low competitiveness of many industrial goods in both domestic and international markets (Arsakhanova 2005). Despite these structural limitations, continued economic growth in subsequent years – fuelled by energy exports and rising income levels – further reduced poverty and unemployment.



A review of Kazakhstan's economic transformation over the three decades since independence highlights several critical junctures: the re-establishment of trade and political ties with former Soviet republics through the formation of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and a regional free trade area; the surge of foreign investment and rapid economic growth in the early 2000s, primarily driven by natural resource exports; the global financial crisis of 2008–2009; deepening Eurasian integration through the establishment of the CIS Customs Union in 2010 and the Eurasian Economic Union in 2015; the sharp decline in global oil prices in 2015–2016, which led to GDP contraction and currency devaluation; and, more recently, the global COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, which further disrupted the economy (Mukhamediyev and Temerbulatova 2021).

## The Situation of Poles in Kazakhstan in the Early Period of Independence: Similarities and Differences in the Situations of the German and Polish Diasporas in Kazakhstan

Parallels can be drawn between the situation of Poles and Germans in Kazakhstan following the collapse of the Soviet Union, as both groups faced comparable challenges as ethnic minorities in a newly independent state. As Tamara Volkova (Volkova 2022) noted, emigration of ethnic Germans to Germany increased sharply in the early 1990s, driven by a complex set of political, social, and economic factors. On 25 October 1990, Kazakhstan adopted its Declaration of State Sovereignty, and earlier, on 22 September 1989, the Law on Languages of the Kazakh SSR was enacted, designating Kazakh as the state language. With the proclamation of independence on 16 December 1991, political transformation and deteriorating economic conditions accelerated the outmigration of non-titular ethnic groups. According to incomplete data from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, nearly 300,000 ethnic Germans left for the Federal Republic of Germany between 1988 and 1992. According to Alfred Dederer (Aisfeld and Dederer 2017), among those Germans who had survived the 1941 deportations, there persisted a sense of psychological unease and fear of renewed forced relocation – this time from Kazakhstan. Incidents involving ethnic tensions in Novy Uzen and Ust-Kamenogorsk further intensified fears of rising Kazakh nationalism and religious fundamentalism

among the German population. Another important motivation for emigration was rooted in the moral and symbolic sphere. Although official documents acknowledged that tens of thousands of ethnic Germans had made substantial contributions to Kazakhstan's national economy, their efforts were not perceived as adequately recognised. A particularly sensitive issue was the legal and personal status of those who had served in the wartime "labour army," whose contributions were not officially equated with military or civilian labour front service. The Labour Army (Russian: трудовая армия, *trudovaya armiya*) referred to militarised labour formations in the USSR. These units were composed of conscripted civilians or demobilised soldiers who were assigned to perform essential non-combat labour, particularly in industry, construction, and agriculture, often under military discipline. Following the collapse of the USSR and the establishment of diplomatic relations between Kazakhstan and Germany, several repatriation and financial support programs were initiated by the German government. However, the government of Kazakhstan was reluctant to support the mass emigration of ethnic Germans for a number of reasons (Badalova and Zolotareva 2017). Firstly, their departure had a tangible negative impact on the economy: according to internal estimates (though the methodology is not specified), the emigration of every 100,000 Germans caused economic losses amounting to 4 billion rubles (in 1990 prices). Secondly, officials expressed concern that the departure of ethnic Germans had a demoralizing effect on other minority groups, thereby undermining political stability in the republic (Volkova 2022).

### The Situation of Poles in Kazakhstan in the Early Period of Independence: Economic Aspects of the Life of the Polish Diaspora in Kazakhstan

Thus, deteriorating economic conditions and various psychological factors were key drivers of the hardships experienced by ethnic Germans in Kazakhstan and their subsequent emigration. Comparable patterns are evident in the case of the Polish diaspora. As Zdzisław Nowiński (Nowiński 2002) observes, the economic downturn of the mid-1990s had a pronounced negative effect on the Polish population in Kazakhstan. Beginning around 1996, the economic stagnation became particularly visible. For example, collective farms (*kolkhozes*),

where many ethnic Poles were employed, ceased to pay wages, instead issuing food ration cards that had little practical value, as store shelves were empty.

Significant assistance in the organisation and cultural consolidation of the Polish community in Kazakhstan came from Polish civil society. Jan Plater-Gajewski, from Warsaw, was among the first to visit Kazakhstan in early 1990. During his 10-day visit, he helped establish the Union of Poles in Kazakhstan, which by March of that year already had 11 branches. A Polish song competition was organised during his visit, with 28 ensembles participating – including three Polish-language groups. However, most participants performed Polish songs in other languages. Nowiński (2002) also details the scale of humanitarian assistance provided by Polish organisations. In 1994, the first exploratory convoy of the Polish Humanitarian Action (*Polska Akcja Humanitarna*, PAH) was dispatched to Kazakhstan, delivering six tons of medicines and other goods. In 1994–1995, three additional humanitarian convoys followed, with the majority of supplies directed to the Medical-Sanatorium Centre in Kazakhstan. The organisation also provided aid to the Regional Children’s Hospital in Kokshetau, the city with the largest concentration of ethnic Poles in the country (approximately 25,000). Other beneficiaries included a district hospital (400 beds), a centre for children with disabilities (250 beds), and a children’s hospital (250 beds). Later, from 14 June to 4 July 1996, a large humanitarian shipment was organised by the “Pomost” Foundation – Help for Poles in the East, based in Radom. The convoy included two trucks (each with 24-ton capacity) and two escort vehicles with a trailer carrying audio-visual equipment (televisions, VCRs, a collection of historical films, and satellite receivers), as well as folk costumes and scout uniforms for Polish children in Tyumen, Western Siberia. The total value of this shipment was estimated at USD 211,386.67 (Nowiński 2002).

In the early years of independence, the changes brought about by the new political and economic circumstances were not immediately apparent, particularly in the provinces. Although the economic situation deteriorated significantly, the local population was largely accustomed to such hardships from previous periods of instability (Gawęcki 2005).

“Kazakhstan of those times remains in my memory as a country engulfed by economic crisis. There was little to buy. Kazakhstan was at a crossroads. There was no certainty whether it would be possible to transition from

communism to independence without conflicts. Kazakhstan in 1997 and Kazakhstan in 2013 represent two different eras. There is noticeable progress in many aspects of daily life. A few years ago, I was surprised that the Polish language was not preserved among the Poles in Kazakhstan. Now it does not surprise me. These were simply the consequences of history. Despite the lack of knowledge of the Polish language, they recognise their roots and nationality, which is often indicated by their surnames and life stories. There are numerous testimonies of loyalty to Poland. The language issue is important for those Poles who want to return to present-day Poland. Our task is to bring Poles in Kazakhstan closer to the contemporary realities of Poland, which has changed dynamically. Practically every decade is a different Poland. I would like, despite these changes, for the connection between Poles in Kazakhstan and Poland to be maintained." From an interview with Andrzej Papierz, Consul General of the Republic of Poland (Serebriansky 2013).

The source material for this article section consists of personal recollections and testimonies of members of the Polish diaspora in Kazakhstan, published in the *Алматы́нский Курьер Полонийны* between 2012 and 2018. Several of these memoirs highlight the hardships associated with the economic conditions in Kazakhstan during the 1990s and in subsequent years. The recollections of Leon Krynicki, an active member of the Polish community in Kazakhstan, also serve to illustrate the situation:

"A film by Rafał Dzienciolowski and Andrzej Papierz, 'Far Away, Even Further.' was shown. The fact is that our esteemed Consul General, 18 years ago, as a journalist of Polish television, along with a fellow journalist Rafał Dzienciolowski, came to Northern Kazakhstan and filmed a report on local Poles. We, Almaty residents, had long asked to show this film. On the screen were the tragic 90s. Chaos in the villages. Collective farms were collapsing. There was no electricity. Equipment stood without fuel, no spare parts, no work. People were confused and depressed. The German population left their homes and went to their historical homeland. Russians went to Russia. Poles remained, exhausted and worn out. Their hands were shown, with twisted, unbending fingers like tree roots. One thin Polish woman in simple peasant clothes spoke in Polish about the harsh realities of life. The familiar collective farm life was collapsing. While talking to journalists, she took out bread from the oven. They used perforated pots, but the bread was fluffy, rosy, and half a meter high" (Krynicki 2015).

“In 1970, she married Yuriy Aleksandrovich Zaychenko (1944–1998). By origin: her father was Polish, her mother was Ukrainian. In 1977, their son Andrey was born. In 1972, she transferred to work in urban social welfare. Since 1987, she worked as a plastic and rubber presser, and later as a caster at the Instrument-Making Plant. In December 1996, she was laid off, one year before retirement. Since 1997, she has been on an ecological pension, and since 2002, she has been receiving an additional rehabilitation allowance” (Rezontova 2014).

“In 2011, trade between Poland and Kazakhstan exceeded 1 billion US dollars, strengthening Kazakhstan’s position as Poland’s primary economic partner in Central Asia and the fourth largest in the post-Soviet territory.

The Kazakhstani side also emphasises and values the significant contribution of Polish exiles to the development of modern Kazakhstan, to the study of Kazakh culture and customs, and to the popularisation of knowledge about Kazakhs and Kazakhstan. Notable individuals include Adolf Januszkiewicz, Alexander Zataevich, and Bronisław Zaleski. It should be noted that today, representatives of the Polish diaspora are actively involved in the social and political life of Kazakhstan. Two Kazakhstani Poles, Anatoly Makovsky and Svetlana Romanovskaya, are deputies in the Kazakh Parliament. Representatives of Polonia are active in business and economic activities. An example is the successful agricultural complex of the Rafalski brothers in the ‘Tayinsha’ area of the North Kazakhstan region”, from an interview with Jerzy Wenderlich by Oleg Chervinsky (Chervinsky 2012).

Significant steps in economic cooperation between Poland and Kazakhstan included the establishment of the Polish Business Club in Almaty (16 February 2010) in cooperation with the Embassy of the Republic of Poland in Almaty, uniting Polish entrepreneurs working in Kazakhstan, and the Association of Business Clubs of the Republic of Kazakhstan (26 May 2010), which united representatives of the Polish Business Club and business circles of Kazakhstan to support Polish-Kazakhstani economic initiatives.

“Despite the modest staffing of the representation, as well as the lack of an economic affairs officer, we provided extensive support to Polish economic entities seeking to establish contacts with representatives of Kazakhstani businesses. I personally conducted twelve such exploratory visits, promoting Polish business and creating a favourable climate for

future Polish economic missions to Kazakhstan (meetings with akims [mayors] in Almaty, Atyrau, Aktobe, Shymkent, Taraz, Taldykorgan, Ust-Kamenogorsk, Bishkek, Jalalabad). I participated (speeches, opening of Polish stands, etc.) in the grand openings of international exhibitions such as Worldfood Kazakhstan, Kazupack, or Agroworld held at the Atakent exhibition centre in Almaty (the main meeting place for entrepreneurs from Kazakhstan and Central Asia). I attended many press conferences dedicated to Polish Kazakhstani business issues and spoke with representatives of Kazakhstani media (press, TV) about the opportunities and prospects of economic and trade cooperation with Poland.

The representation office prepared and participated in the implementation of thirteen economic missions and business visits from Polish entrepreneurs. We participated in regular meetings of the Polish Business Club in Almaty. Forty-seven Kazakhstani-Polish enterprises and twenty-five enterprises with Polish capital operate in Almaty. In 2012, the trade turnover between Poland and Almaty increased by 21% and reached 825 million dollars” – Wiesław Osuchowski, Consul General of Poland in the Republic of Kazakhstan, interview by Oleg Chervinsky (Chervinsky 2015).

“Polish exports to Kazakhstan have long been dominated by machinery, mechanical and electrical equipment, pharmaceuticals, household chemicals, cosmetics and hygiene products, dairy products, fruits, including the extremely popular 'Polish apples,' sealants, paints, and varnishes, as well as meat and meat products.

Poles deported to Kazakhstan in 1936–1937 brought with them a high work culture and respect for labour. These people established a positive image of hardworking Polish neighbours here, and in general, a positive image of Poland among the population of Kazakhstan.

The trade turnover between Poland and Kazakhstan in 2011 was 1,696,803.10. In 2012, it was 2,103,000.90. In 2013, it was 1,171,729.4. In 2014, it was 1,025,692.40 [million USD].

There are about 190 business entities with Polish capital registered in Kazakhstan, half of them in Almaty. Thus, besides Polonia, another part of the Poles living in Almaty are Polish businessmen. The Polish Business Club operates in Kazakhstan, managed by Mr. Artur Januszewski in Almaty Andrzej Stefański, head of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Poland in Kazakhstan (Chervinsky 2015).

“Ambassador of Poland in Kazakhstan Mr. J. Kluczkowski, followed by Consul General Mr. A. Papierz, expressed gratitude for the respect

shown to the Poles by the country's leadership and the region. They also expressed pride in our compatriot A. Rafalski, who, under the difficult conditions of the 90s, managed to preserve the village infrastructure, save the people, and prevent the collective farm property from being dismantled. Being an experienced manager and administrator (his father B. Rafalski was the chairman of the Chkalov District Executive Committee of the Kokchetav Region), he created a new rural entity – Tayinsha-Astyk Ltd, a strong team, and despite the vagaries of nature, achieves high profits” (Krenitski 2015).

In the Tayinsha District of North Kazakhstan Region, the village of Yasnaya Polyana is often described as exemplary in terms of both agricultural productivity and social infrastructure. The settlement boasts a well-developed farm, a first-aid station, retail shops, a public bathhouse, a school, a children's mini-centre, a cultural centre, a café, a Catholic church, a Polish cultural house, and a museum dedicated to the history of special settlers. The village is also noted for its clean streets and well-maintained homes. Today, Yasnaya Polyana continues to undergo positive transformation. The agricultural sector is expanding, the local farm enterprise is growing stronger, landscaping and beautification projects are ongoing, and new social facilities are being introduced. On the village's official celebration day, regional governor Erik Sultanov and Anatoly Rafalski, general director of “Tayinsha-Astyk Ltd.,” participated in the ceremonial opening of a new sports and recreation complex (Chervinsky 2016).

In his welcoming address, District Mayor E. Imanislam highlighted key historical milestones in the village's development. Initially known as “Point No. 2” (Donetsk village), it was later reorganised into the collective farm “Krasnaya Zvezda” (“Red Star”), which eventually evolved into one of the most prosperous agricultural enterprises in the region, now characterised by a robust and well-developed social infrastructure (Chervinsky 2016).

“I am already 82 years old, and I have lived a happy life. I realised many dreams through my son, who graduated from Bauman University instead of me and now lives in Almaty. I went from an engineer to the director of the largest design institute in Central Asia. I have awards. I often travel to Poland, where my younger brother lives, whom I helped move from Karaganda with his family in the difficult 90s. They live well, and no one reproaches them” (Lubchansky 2016).

“My father, Leonid Polyansky, graduated from school in 1974, worked for a year on a collective farm, and in May 1975, he joined the army. He returned in the spring of 1977, and already in September, he entered a pedagogical college. He worked as a physical education teacher in a rural school until 1989. Then he decided to get higher education and entered the history faculty of the pedagogical institute in Petropavlovsk. After graduating, my father began working as a history teacher. Our family still lives in the village of Yasnaya Polyana. My parents work at the Yasnaya Polyana secondary school. My father is a history teacher, and my mother is a deputy principal and a teacher of Russian language and literature” (Polyanskaya 2017).

Polish deportees transported to a gold mine in Kazakhstan (1942). Photo: Institute of National Remembrance Branch in Szczecin Archives, collection of Związek Sybiraków, Branch in Gorzów Wielkopolski, ref. no. Sz 671/1, vol. 4

In the 1990s, the Republic of Kazakhstan lagged behind industrialised nations in terms of agricultural production. To address this issue, a process of agricultural restructuring was initiated in 1991. By 1998, a total of 138 agricultural associations had been established across the republic. In April 1999, the North Kazakhstan Region saw the formation of the *Kazexportastyk* holding company, one of the country’s largest agro-industrial groups. In February 2010, two major companies – *Agrofirma Kzyltu-Nan Ltd.* and *Tayinsha-Astyk*



Ltd. – joined the *Kazexportastyk* holding. These enterprises are among the largest in the country, specializing in the production and processing of agricultural goods.

*Tayinsha-Astyk* Ltd., established in 2005 and headquartered in the village of Yasnaya Polyana (Tayinsha District, North Kazakhstan Region), focuses on livestock breeding, including Kazakh White-Headed and Canadian Holstein cattle breeds. The Polish Ambassador to Kazakhstan (2000–2004), Zdzisław Nowicki, referred to Yasnaya Polyana as “a little Warsaw in Kazakhstan.” The village was founded on 14 June 1936 by Polish settlers deported from Ukraine. Of the 183 original settler families, 127 were of Polish origin. Today, the third generation of ethnic Poles resides in the village (Stepanenko 2020).

Poles deported to Kazakhstan not only endured the economic hardships of the early years of Kazakhstan’s independence – while still facing the lingering effects of Soviet-era laws that had restricted their rights compared to other citizens – but also contributed to the development of the country’s economy, primarily in the agricultural sector.

## The Situation of Poles in Kazakhstan in the Early Period of Independence: Cultural Aspects of the Life of the Polish Diaspora in Kazakhstan

As noted by Adrian Berski (2012), the standard of living of the Polish minority in Kazakhstan is comparable to that of the titular Kazakh population. The Polish diaspora remains concentrated in three main regions: North Kazakhstan, Akmola, and Karaganda, as well as in the vicinity of Almaty. Approximately 2,500 Poles reside in the capital. Compared to other ethnic groups in Kazakhstan, Poles are among the least urbanised minorities. More than 80% of the deported Poles continue to reside in rural areas and are employed in agriculture. The initial legal restrictions placed on them – including the prohibition against settling in cities and large towns – continue to limit their economic and social mobility.

The first Polish cultural association in Kazakhstan was established in 1989 in Kokshetau (formerly [up to 1993] Kokchetav), initiated by Anatoly Dyachinsky. Similar centres soon emerged in Karaganda (led by F. Boguslavsky), Almaty (A. Levkovsky), and other cities. These associations were officially registered in 1992 and subsequently united under the umbrella of the Union of Poles in Kazakhstan (*Związek*

*Polaków Kazachstanu, ZPK*). Structurally, the ZPK comprises thirteen regional associations, each headed by an elected chairperson (*prezes*). At the local level, district and village organisations are incorporated into the regional branches of the ZPK. The activities of the Union at the national level are coordinated by the Republican Coordination Council, led by an elected national chairperson. The Almaty consular district includes approximately 30% of the Polish population in Kazakhstan and encompasses seven of the thirteen regional Polish associations, as well as eight district-level organisations affiliated with the ZPK (Serebriansky 2013).

“The Public Association “Zhambyl Regional Polish Cultural Center” was established in 1997 and registered with the justice department on 11 June. On 3 March 2011, it was re-registered and renamed the Public Association “Zhambyl Regional Centre for Polish Language and Culture Polonez”. The founder and first chairperson of the centre was Anna Petrovna Rabtsevich, the daughter of repressed Poles. Having worked for many years as a civil engineer, a competent and intelligent specialist in her field, she was passionate about her historical homeland and the Poles scattered across Kazakhstan. After Anna Rabtsevich moved to Poland, the centre was headed by Viktor Mikhailovich Kanevsky, the son of repressed parents. He began his career as a senior master at a local college, later worked as a deputy director, was an honoured teacher of the Republic of Kazakhstan, held the title of distinguished excellent professional educator, and was awarded government honours” (Kalkova 2015).

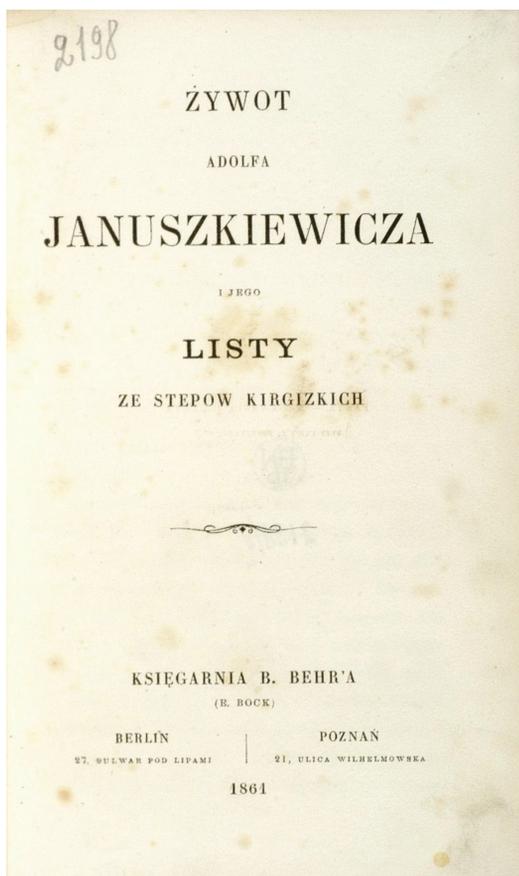
“Albertina Antonovna Bakovskaya lived her long life in the village of Gorky, worked tirelessly, and despite the tragic nature of her fate, was very kind, responsive, and helped everyone, giving away her last possessions if someone needed them. She had a small house with a garden plot where she constantly grew potatoes and cabbage. And what carrots and garlic she had – they were fit for an agricultural exhibition! Her house was always impeccably clean and smelled of something familiar and delicious. Perhaps that’s the smell of childhood. We must give credit to the collective farm management for the attention they paid to the lonely woman in her everyday problems. Even in the difficult 1990s, the leadership of the collective farm in the village named after Gorky, headed by Stanislav Sobolevsky, did not abandon my aunt and provided her with material assistance. Albertina Antonovna was assigned a social worker who took care of her and provided all kinds of help around the house” (Baikovski and Baikovskaya 2015).

Several Polish-language periodicals have been published in Kazakhstan, reflecting the cultural and social life of the local Polish community. For many years, the Shortandy District Association of Poles “Poliane” issued the magazine *Głos Polski*. Since 2012, the quarterly *Almatyński Kurier Polonijny* has been published in Almaty by the Polish Cultural Center “Więź,” headed by Oleg Chervinsky. In 2020, a new publication entitled *Almator* was launched by Piotr Boroń and Lucyna Ejma, based at Secondary School No. 23 in Almaty, which hosts a dedicated Polish class. Since 1991, several positive factors have influenced decisions among members of the Polish diaspora in Kazakhstan regarding migration, and these factors remain relevant today. Meanwhile, the influence of earlier negative factors has diminished due to improvements in Kazakhstan’s economic conditions, as well as the removal of restrictions on mobility, access to higher education, and career opportunities.

The establishment of Polish cultural and educational organisations capable of maintaining contacts with institutions and authorities in Poland has played a significant role in providing both internal and external support for the Polish community in Kazakhstan.

The first Polish-language school class in Kazakhstan was established in 1988 in the village of Ozernoe, following the signing of the Cooperation Agreement between the Ministries of Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Republic of Poland. Within the framework of this agreement, the Polish side has regularly dispatched 35–40 Polish language teachers to schools across Kazakhstan, supplying textbooks, educational materials, and technical teaching aids to support instruction (Lewkowski 2016).

On 11 May 2013, a commemorative plaque was unveiled at Almaty School-Gymnasium No. 23 to mark the naming of its Polish-language class after the Polish exile Adolf Januszkiewicz (1803–1857) – a Polish



Title page of the book *Żywot Adolfa Januszkiewicza i jego listy ze stepów kirgizkich* [Adolf Januszkiewicz’s life and his letters from the Kyrgyz steppe], Paris-Berlin-Poznań: J. Claye, P. Behr, 1861. National Library, Warsaw, Poland

patriot, ethnographer, and collector of Kazakh oral traditions, best known as the author of *Diary Notes from Travels in the Kyrgyz Steppes*.

Polish language instruction in Kazakhstani schools enables children of Polish descent to pursue higher education opportunities at universities in Poland and contributes to the preservation and transmission of their ethnic and cultural identity.

Diplomatic relations between the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Republic of Poland were formally established on 6 April 1992. In March 1994, the Embassy of the Republic of Poland was opened in Kazakhstan. The Polish Embassy, General Consulate, Polish Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and the Polish trade representative office have since maintained active cooperation with the Polish diaspora in Kazakhstan and with Kazakhstani authorities, providing support for cultural, educational, and economic initiatives aimed at strengthening the Polish community in the country.

“A unanimous decision was made to establish a branch of the “Więź” Polish Society in Zhanashar. Victor Iosifovich Veselsky was elected as chairman, with Nina Vitalyevna Bartoshevskaya as deputy. Branches were later established in Dmitrievka, Oktyabr, Nikolaevka, Talgar, and other settlements with a significant Polish population, totalling eight branches. In the early years after the society’s and its branches’ formation, humanitarian aid was provided through the Polish Humanitarian Action (PAH), including packages with household items, school supplies, children’s goods, and financial assistance ranging from \$20 to \$100 for the neediest. In 1995, Polish Prime Minister Waldemar Pawlak visited Almaty officially, announcing a \$30 million loan from Poland to Kazakhstan, which invigorated the activities of the Polish Union in Kazakhstan and reinforced hopes for a connection with their historical homeland.

A significant event was the meeting with the President of Poland, Aleksander Kwaśniewski, in October 1999, which further bolstered the activities of the “Więź” society” (Lewkowski 2016).

In parallel with economic development, educational and cultural ties between Kazakhstan and Poland have continued to expand. Notably, fruitful cooperation has been established in the academic sphere. Kazakh National University (KazNU) has formed partnerships with eleven higher education institutions in Poland. These include the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, universities in Koszalin, the University of Łódź,

the Częstochowa University of Technology, and the Poznań Center for Human Rights at the Institute of Legal Sciences of the Polish Academy of Sciences, as well as the Adam Marszałek publishing house. These partnerships have created favourable conditions for academic exchange between faculty and students of both countries. The number of students participating in academic mobility programs continues to grow annually. Leading Polish scholars and professors regularly deliver lectures at KazNU and supervise doctoral students. Notably, the Faculty of Chemistry and Chemical Technology at KazNU houses a laboratory named in honour of Nobel laureate Marie Skłodowska-Curie. Academic exchange programs in the fields of natural sciences, law, and humanities are actively developing (Chervinsky 2017).

Kazakhstan proclaimed itself a unitary state in 1991. Subsequently, on 1 March 1995, the Assembly of the Peoples of Kazakhstan was established to represent the interests of the country's multi-ethnic population, including the Polish diaspora. In 2007, the organisation was renamed the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan, reflecting a shift toward a more civic-oriented model of national integration. The Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan is a non-legislative entity established by the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan. It plays a consultative and coordinating role in shaping and implementing state policies aimed at ensuring public accord and national unity. The declared core principles of the Assembly include: Equality of rights and freedoms for all citizens of the Republic, regardless of race, ethnicity, language, religion, or social status; Comprehensive development and preservation of national cultures, languages, and traditions of the peoples of Kazakhstan; Expansion of integrative cooperation with international organisations; Formation of a unified Kazakhstani identity through the consolidation of the country's multiethnic population; Promotion of spiritual unity, interethnic friendship, and mutual understanding among the peoples of Kazakhstan.

The overarching mission of the Assembly is to preserve interethnic and interfaith harmony and social stability in the republic. It develops policy proposals to strengthen interethnic relations, supports the cultural and spiritual revival of ethnic groups, and encourages civic political culture grounded in democratic values. The Assembly also serves as a platform for reconciling diverse national interests and addressing potential social tensions through compromise and dialogue. The Assembly holds a constitutional quota of nine seats in the *Mazhilis* (lower house) of the Parliament of Kazakhstan. The procedure for electing these deputies is defined by the Constitutional

Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan “On Elections.” Elections are conducted during an Assembly session convened by the President of the Republic, with the participation of the Assembly’s Chairperson and members of the electoral commission of the respective territorial unit. A number of activities in Kazakhstan are jointly supported by the state, the Assembly, the Polish Embassy, and both Polish and local civic organisations. One of the most prominent examples of cultural cooperation is the *Polonia Śpiewająca* festival, which has evolved from a small singing event into a major annual celebration of Polish identity and culture in Kazakhstan. According to organiser Mila Sukhovetskaya, the Polish Embassy in Astana, particularly Consul Bartosz Jabłoński, played a key role in the early development of the event by providing guidance and support. The festival also received backing from the *Wspólnota Polska* association and local authorities, including the regional *akimat* and the Akmola Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan. The first edition of *Polonia Śpiewająca* featured 13 groups and solo performers from Astana, Pavlodar, Kokshetau, and districts of North Kazakhstan and Akmola regions, comprising a total of 51 participants. In its second year, the festival achieved official national status, expanding to 21 groups and 112 participants from cities such as Astana, Karaganda, Pavlodar, Petropavlovsk, and Kokshetau. By the third year, the event attracted 162 participants from Astana, Almaty, Kokshetau, Kostanay, Pavlodar, Petropavlovsk, Taiynsha, Taraz, Ekibastuz, and surrounding districts. In its most recent edition, 124 individuals took part, representing cities and districts including Astana, Almaty, Kokshetau, Kostanay, Pavlodar, Temirtau, Shymkent, Ekibastuz, and Taiynsha, with additional applications submitted from Taraz and Aktobe (Chervinsky 2015). The Union of Poles of the Akmola Region receives regular support from a variety of governmental and cultural institutions, including the Secretariat of the Akmola Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan, the House of Friendship, the Regional Centre for Folk Creativity, and the Departments of Culture, Internal Policy, and Education. In 2009, the Union won a government social contract to produce Polish national costumes, receiving 1 million tenge to sew six sets of traditional men’s and women’s outfits from the Łowicz region. In 2010, with financial support from the regional *akim*, two women’s costumes from the Silesian region and matching footwear were produced. The regional administration continues to provide annual funding for the centre’s activities, including the organisation of cultural events.



Further assistance has been provided through the Embassy of the Republic of Poland in Astana, which facilitated the acquisition of traditional Kraków and noble costumes, furniture, office equipment, and educational materials for Polish language instruction. The *Wspólnota Polska* association has also been a consistent donor, offering annual financial and material support to sustain the Union's operations and cultural programming (Chervinsky 2015).

Polish deportees in Peschanka, Kostanay district, Kazakhstan (1942). Photo: courtesy of Hałaciński Family.

## The Situation of Poles in Kazakhstan in the Early Period of Independence: Religious Aspects of the Life of the Polish Diaspora in Kazakhstan

There is a clear religious revival among Kazakhstani Poles. Apart from the theological basis of this phenomenon, it must be acknowledged that Catholicism, even though Polish is often not the language of liturgy there, is perceived as a Polish religion. If someone consciously chooses to identify as Polish, they typically demonstrate this through their affiliation with the Catholic Church as well. Church gatherings, besides providing religious experiences, offer an excellent opportunity to manifest not only one's religious affiliation but also national identity. They also serve as occasions for informal information exchange

(Gawęcki 2005). As in the Soviet period, the ability to practice religion remained one of the most important elements in preserving cultural identity, traditions, and community cohesion among Poles in Kazakhstan. In the post-Soviet era, religious life has continued to play a central role in sustaining the Polish diaspora's sense of belonging and cultural continuity.

A number of contemporary memoirs include detailed descriptions of religious activities, offering valuable insights into the broader socio-economic conditions faced by the Polish community. These narratives provide a lens through which one can assess not only the persistence of religious and cultural practices, but also the material circumstances under which they were maintained.

“Poles awaited the time when public associations began to form, Polish language teachers, missionaries, and priests arrived. They taught the language, promoted Polish culture and customs, and conducted Holy Mass in Polish. The Polish community began to rally around these people, opening language classes and churches. After marriage (the family of Boris Bober, Mrs. Antonina's husband, was exiled to the Almaty region), the family moved to live in Dmitrievka village. They worked diligently in agriculture, raising and educating two children. When in the 1990s the question arose of where the Polish diaspora in Dmitrievka would gather for Holy Mass, Mrs. Antonina invited people to her home. Her personal qualities such as love for people, readiness to serve others, compassion, integrity, and modesty played a significant role. For 20 years, Mrs. Antonina prepared her home monthly to receive parishioners. Her doors were always open to those who wanted to communicate with God. A priest came monthly to conduct Holy Masses, and public figures, students, graduate students from Poland, and consulate representatives came to meet with Poles. People came to Holy Mass not only from Dmitrievka and Bayserke, but also from Tonkeris, Chapaevka, Kokterek, Pervomayka, Energeticheskoye, Pokrovka, Luch Vostoka, Almaty, Kapchagay, and other places. Religion classes, retreats with youth and children, and meetings with elderly people were held here. In September 2001, a group of parishioners was invited to meet with Pope John Paul II in Astana, and Mrs. Antonina was honoured to occupy a place for distinguished guests during the Holy Mass at the Motherland Square in Astana. Over the years, children grew up, and many went to study in Poland. About a hundred parishioners moved to live permanently in Poland, Russia, Canada, Germany, and other countries” (Volvach 2013).

In 1997, a figure of the Virgin Mary with a net full of fish was erected on the shore of Lake Sasykol. It was consecrated by Pope John Paul II during his visit to Kazakhstan in 2001. In 1990, a Mary Queen of Peace Catholic parish was established in Ozernoye, with Fr. Tomasz Peta, who is now the Archbishop Metropolitan of the Archdiocese of St. Mary in Nur-Sultan, as the first priest. Construction of a church began, resembling the one in Medjugorje (an international pilgrimage centre in Bosnia and Herzegovina), although the residents did not know about this place before (Całczyńska 2021).

“In 1997, the Polish cultural and educational society 'Polonia' was established in Taldykorgan, and Deonisia Pavlovna Belyavskaya became its first member, as well as a member of the society's council, where she still serves. Deonisia Pavlovna actively participates in the work of the Polish centre, the assembly, and the council of elders. She is awarded for a Distinguished Culture Contribution and is a cinema industry merit badge holder. She continues to work actively in our Polish centre, the assembly, and the council of elders, for which she has received letters of appreciation from President Nazarbayev, and on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Republic of Kazakhstan's independence she was awarded a medal. For 20 years, there has been a Polish community in our village, and for 12 years there was a Polish language elective class at the school. Our elders have always supported and helped us in everything. We prayed at home with Galina Novakowska. Teachers from Poland lived at Sabina Novakowska house. Everyone helped as best they could. Now we have the Church of Divine Mercy. Many priests have changed over the years. When Albert Grigoryevich Levkovsky from Almaty first came to our village in 1993, he brought with him Father Klaudiusz. Masses were held in the home of Sergey Kardash in 1993. Father Kalikst Salak, who served from 1993 to 2004 in the villages of Zhanshar, Bazarkeldy, Kosmos, Bayanday, and the cities of Talgar and Issyk, came to us. In 1995, Masses were held in the home of Nadezhda Andreevna Glazkova. In 1996, Masses were held in the home of the Alisovs family, and when they moved to Germany for permanent residence, this house was acquired to create a church. In 1996, the house was rebuilt and renovated. Our Roman Catholic church became the Church of the Crown of Thorns. Here, lectures were held for children, youth, and older generations. Father Kalixt visited our homes and was a spiritual mentor. In 1996, we had a major confirmation celebration in Zhanshar, with participation of 30 parishioners. The charitable medical ambulatory at our church was built in 1999 under the guidance of Brother Diego Kim Changam Nan. Financial

support for the construction and equipping of the ambulatory came mainly from believers in Korea. Father Diego's team included excellent doctors specializing in sujok therapy, who came and provided treatment for villagers of all nationalities and religions for free and selflessly, ensuring no one was left without medical assistance. They held consultations once a week. However, for about three years now, our ambulatory has not been operating due to the lack of heating and water. Now consultations are held in Almaty, at the Holy Trinity Parish" (Levitskaya 2013).

"In our village of Nura, a branch of the Polish society was organised in 1994, led by my sister Yadviga and her husband Mikhail. They were involved in the rehabilitation of repressed Poles; a total of 33 Poles from our village were rehabilitated. In 2003, a church was opened in Nura and named the Church of the Mother of the Holy Rosary. It exists to this day, although fewer people attend now, as many have moved to Poland, Germany, Russia, and Canada" (Guzovskaya 2017).

The preservation and maintenance of the Catholic faith and traditions during a difficult historical period has been a crucial factor in sustaining Polish identity among Poles in Kazakhstan. This factor may also be regarded as one of the primary links connecting the Polish diaspora to the home country.

## The Situation of Poles in Kazakhstan in the Early Period of Independence: Aspects of the Impact of the Repatriation Program on the Life of the Polish Diaspora in Kazakhstan

According to the 2021 national census, 35,319 individuals of Polish ethnicity currently reside in Kazakhstan, constituting approximately 0.18% of the country's total population. The Polish population is concentrated primarily in the northern regions of the country, including the North Kazakhstan Region, Akmola Region, and Kostanay Region. The highest concentration is found in the North Kazakhstan Region, where 10,848 Poles reside – comprising 2% of the region's population. Today, the Polish diaspora in Kazakhstan is composed almost entirely of individuals born in the country during the Soviet or post-Soviet periods. For the majority of Poles in Kazakhstan, Russian is the primary language of everyday communication. In contrast to other Slavic ethnic groups in the republic – such as Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians

– the Polish population did not experience mass emigration during the early post-Soviet years. As a result, the proportion of Poles in the North Kazakhstan Region even increased, despite the overall population decline due to negative natural demographic trends. The Polish community in Kazakhstan consists mostly of two main groups: descendants of settlers who arrived between the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and descendants of forcibly deported Poles – primarily from what is now Ukraine and Lithuania – who were exiled to Kazakhstan during the 1930s and 1940s under Stalinist policies.

The villages and towns where Poles currently live reflect the multinational structure of the entire Republic of Kazakhstan. Poles who previously lived in Ukraine adapted to the need to coexist with representatives of other nationalities, such as Ukrainians, Germans, Jews, and Russians. Long-standing mutual ties allowed homogeneous cultural communities to form, resulting from the blending of elements from various ethnic groups. In the responses of those surveyed, interethnic relations in their places of residence before forced resettlement are generally described positively, without any interethnic conflicts (Gawęcki 1998).

On 17 January 1956, a decree issued by the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR formally lifted the special settlement restrictions imposed on Poles exiled in 1936. However, despite the abolition of these restrictions, the geographic distribution of the Polish diaspora in Kazakhstan remained largely unchanged.

By the time of the 1959 Soviet population census, Poles were formally recognised as full-fledged citizens of the USSR, and special supervision over them had been officially abolished. Nonetheless, as archival evidence indicates, many continued to be monitored by administrative authorities and had not been officially rehabilitated. Although they were considered Soviet citizens, most ethnic Poles did not possess internal passports until 1959. In certain regions, passports were not issued to them until the 1970s (Gawęcki 1998).

A significant step toward restoring historical justice for repressed peoples came with the adoption of the Declaration of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR on 14 November 1989, entitled “On Recognizing as Illegal and Criminal the Repressive Acts Against Peoples Who Were Forcibly Relocated and Ensuring Their Rights.” This document officially rehabilitated all repressed peoples and condemned the repressive acts committed against them – including forced relocation, the abolition of national-state entities, and the imposition of terror and violence in special settlements – as illegal and criminal at the state level.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan experienced large waves of emigration, significantly altering the country's demographic composition. The peak of the demographic crisis, marked by substantial population decline, occurred between 1993 and 1997. During this period, the negative net migration balance reached 1,969,600 people. The key trend in the evolving ethnic structure of the republic was the growth of the titular ethnic group (Kazakhs) and the sharp decline in the size of major diasporas, such as Russians, Germans, Ukrainians, and Belarusians. The country's total population continued to decline until mid-2002 (Serebrianskiy 2020). The outmigration of Russians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians was largely driven by ongoing familial ties with relatives in Russia and other former Soviet republics. In addition, the German government actively facilitated the repatriation of ethnic Germans from Kazakhstan by offering favourable migration conditions. Broader push factors included Kazakhstan's economic difficulties in the 1990s and interethnic tensions in neighbouring post-Soviet states. By contrast, the relatively stable numbers of the Polish diaspora during this period may be attributed to less favourable economic conditions in Poland, which made repatriation less attractive. Furthermore, in the early years of independence, a private business involving the resale of used cars imported from Germany emerged in Kazakhstan. These vehicles were often transported via Poland, where Kazakhstani entrepreneurs reportedly encountered corruption and road crime. This contributed to a somewhat negative perception of Poland in Kazakhstan, although the situation improved significantly after 2006.

The General Consulate of the Republic of Poland in Almaty, established by order of the Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs, officially commenced its operations on 18 September 2009, following the relocation of the Polish Embassy to the capital of Kazakhstan, Astana.

Before the opening of the consulate, the Polish Humanitarian Action (*Polska Akcja Humanitarna*) had taken significant steps to support the Polish diaspora in Kazakhstan. In 1994, the organisation launched a long-term Repatriation Assistance Program. Between 1995 and 2000, it drew attention to the circumstances of Poles living in Kazakhstan by organizing six Christmas-season pilgrimages for elderly Polish exiles. The foundation covered the full cost of these visits, including airfare, travel documentation, group accommodation, and meals during their stay in Poland (Gancarz 2012). Support from Polish governmental and non-governmental institutions has played a vital role in fostering

connections between Kazakhstani Poles and Poland. Participation in Polish-funded programs, including the state repatriation initiative, has contributed not only to the physical return of some members of the diaspora but also to the preservation of Polish cultural identity and language among those who have remained in Kazakhstan.

Several personal recollections documented in the memoirs of Kazakhstani Poles refer directly to the rehabilitation of family members, offering insight into how these historical processes are remembered at the individual and community levels.

“Olga Barabash-Alekseeva, a member and activist of the Polish Cultural Center in Almaty: My mother, Lyudmila Pavlovna (always was father’s daughter, very much like him), began fighting for justice. Since 1989, she wrote to the Supreme Court and achieved a document of full rehabilitation for her father” (Barabash 2012).

The adoption of legislation concerning the rehabilitation of Poles in the USSR granted former deportees the formal right to leave their assigned places of settlement, relocate to major urban centres, and pursue higher education. However, due to widespread economic hardship, these opportunities were difficult to fully realise. Moreover, the 1932 decree “On the Establishment of a Unified Passport System throughout the USSR and Mandatory Passport Registration” significantly restricted citizens’ freedom of movement by requiring state approval to change one’s place of residence. In Alma-Ata, the largest city in Kazakhstan and home to the country’s leading institutions of higher education, relocation was possible only with a special permit, which was extremely difficult to obtain (Baiburin 2021).

Today, many Kazakhstani Poles express a desire to relocate permanently to Poland. However, it is also clear that a considerable number intend to remain in Kazakhstan. Whether this community will preserve its ethnic and cultural traditions in the long term, and whether it will serve as a bridge for cooperation between two geographically and historically distant countries, remains an open question (Gawęcki 1998).

In 1995, at the initiative of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Poland, the Interdepartmental Team for Repatriation was established. One of its key achievements was the adoption of legal regulations in July 1996, which authorised Polish consuls to issue approvals for settlement in Poland (Gancarz 2012). A significant advancement occurred with the entry into force of the

new governmental Repatriation Act on 1 May 2017. This legislation enables individuals of Polish origin residing in Kazakhstan and other parts of the Asian former USSR to return to their historical homeland (Chervinsky 2017).

Polish presidential minister Andrzej Dera, when asked about the repatriation process of Poles from Kazakhstan, stated: “It is not finished yet. Currently, about 7,000 Poles are waiting to return to Poland. In recent years, the entire procedure and the transit of Poles living in Kazakhstan to Poland have accelerated” (Mikowski 2023).

On 20 December 2016, a group of 150 individuals of Polish descent arrived in Poland from Kazakhstan. The new repatriates were accommodated at an adaptation centre in Pułtusk, where the organisation *Wspólnota Polska* implemented a comprehensive adaptation program (Chervinsky 2017).

Between 2001 and 2015, approximately 5,000 individuals relocated to Poland under the national repatriation program. According to the 2017 reform of repatriation regulations, an estimated 10,000 persons from the Asian territories of the former USSR are expected to benefit from repatriation within a ten-year implementation period (Chervinsky 2017).

Polish institutions such as *Wspólnota Polska* and *Pomoc Polakom na Wschodzie* play an active role in both the repatriation process and the organisation of preparatory cultural exchange programs for the Polish diaspora in Kazakhstan. A further important mechanism of engagement is the Pole’s Card (*Karta Polaka*), introduced by the Sejm of the Republic of Poland on 7 September 2007. The stated purpose of the program is to implement constitutional provisions regarding support for Poles abroad, fulfil a moral obligation toward them, and strengthen their connection with their historical homeland. Although the Pole’s Card does not grant Polish citizenship or the right to permanent settlement in Poland, nor does it allow visa-free entry, it provides significant privileges related to residence, employment, and access to education in Poland. Between 2008 and 2018, a total of 3,084 Pole’s Cards were issued in Kazakhstan.

According to the official position of the Polish authorities, Poland remains open to receiving individuals of Polish origin from Kazakhstan who wish to return to their historical homeland. The state provides support for their relocation and integration. Preparatory activities aimed at informing and assisting prospective repatriates are also conducted within Kazakhstan. Simultaneously, Poland regards the Polish community in Kazakhstan not only as a beneficiary of

repatriation policy but also as a valuable link for fostering cultural exchange and strengthening economic cooperation between the two countries.

## The Situation of Kazakhstani Poles After 2018

In order to identify the factors influencing the current situation of Poles in Kazakhstan in frames of developing this analysis, a survey was conducted by the author among two target respondent groups: (1) individuals of Polish descent who relocated to Poland under the repatriation program and (2) individuals of Polish descent who currently reside in Kazakhstan. Data were collected using a written questionnaire consisting of open-ended questions during the period of July to August 2025. In total, eight representatives of the Polish diaspora participated in the study: four from the first group (now living in Poland), and four from the second group (residing in Kazakhstan).

An analysis of the responses is presented below, grouped according to each respondent category on a non-anonymous basis (with two exceptions).

### The Situation of Kazakhstani Poles After 2018: First Group – Poles Who Relocated to Poland

The first set of questions focused on the timing of relocation: “When did you move to Poland for permanent residence?” All respondents reported having moved between 2018 and 2022.

The responses to the question regarding the reasons for relocating to Poland were as follows:

“My mother wanted our children to study in Poland, so I fulfilled her wish. I hadn’t planned to emigrate, but the pandemic changed everything: I fell ill and was left alone. After that, we prepared the documents, and I moved. In Poland, my daughters received a state-funded apartment” (Elena Urazgeldiyeva).

“The main reason was that our daughter was growing up, and we understood that the earlier she enrolled in a Polish school and began learning the language, the easier it would be for her to adapt, make friends, and master the language – so all doors would be open to her in life” (Oleg Chervinsky).

“It was about returning to our roots, a better future for both children and parents, and reuniting with relatives” (Irena Poplawska).

“Our Polish roots gave us the opportunity to receive the Pole’s Card and pursue higher education at quality institutions in Poland. Of course, the standard of living is also better” (Darya Boginska).

The next question was formulated as follows “What was the most difficult period of your life in Kazakhstan, and why?” and the respondents answered it as follows:

“I don’t recall any particularly difficult moments in Kazakhstan – even the hardships of the 1990s passed me by” (Elena Urazgeldiyeva).

“I don’t really know how to answer this question. Each period had its own difficulties and positives” (Oleg Chervinsky).

“The early 1990s. Every stage of life in Kazakhstan had both positive and negative aspects” (Irena Poplawska).

“The hardest time was during school – intense academic pressure and stressful final exams” (Darya Boginska).

In response to the question, “Do you have any ties to Kazakhstan now, apart from memories?” the respondents provided the following answers:

“My grandson, who moved from Kazakhstan at age three (now six), answers “Kazakh” when asked who he is. In animation class, he asks to draw the Kazakh flag – that’s our connection” (Elena Urazgeldiyeva).

“Of course there is a connection, and it will always remain: the graves of loved ones, my wife’s father – my daughter’s grandfather – who lives in Almaty, close friends and colleagues. We try to return to Kazakhstan once or twice a year. I also continue publishing analytical articles in the Kazakhstani media, which requires me to stay informed about domestic developments. Recently, I’ve also tried to foster Kazakhstani–Polish business ties by helping Polish entrepreneurs find goods and partners in Kazakhstan. I advise Kazakhstani citizens on business and living conditions in Poland. I also support the life of the Kazakhstani Polonia, helping publish the Polonia journal and supporting visiting youth delegations. Before moving to Poland in 2019, I was elected Honorary Chairman of the Union of Poles in Kazakhstan – a role that carries responsibilities” (Oleg Chervinsky).

“Only memories” (Irena Poplawska).

“Only one thing connects me – my parents, who stayed in Kazakhstan” (Darya Boginska).

Although the small number of respondents does not permit a meaningful quantitative analysis, a qualitative interpretation is nevertheless informative, particularly due to the age diversity among participants, which ranged from students to retirees. This diversity enables the identification of recurring motives for migration. Among the most frequently mentioned reasons were family reunification – particularly following children who had remained in Poland after completing their studies – and the perception of improved living conditions in Poland. However, the dominant motivation expressed by respondents was a desire to return to their ancestral homeland, to reconnect with family, and to secure a better future.

Regarding continued ties to Kazakhstan, two respondents referred only to personal memories. In one case, a child identified as “Kazakh,” indicating that Kazakhstan is still discussed within the family. Another respondent reported maintaining strong professional connections with the country. In Poland, the Union of Kazakhstani Poles serves as an organisational platform for migrants from Kazakhstan, helping them to maintain social and cultural bonds.

Previous studies (Łucka 2021; Gorbanuk 2004) have highlighted adaptation challenges among repatriates from post-Soviet countries, including limited initial proficiency in Polish and the continued use of Russian in domestic settings. The theme of economic hardship in Kazakhstan during the 1990s appeared in two of the four responses to the question about the most difficult period in their lives in Kazakhstan. This finding further supports the conclusion that migration to Poland was primarily driven by a desire to return to one’s roots and by hopes for a more promising future for the next generation.

## The Situation of Kazakhstani Poles After 2018: Second Group – Poles Currently Residing in Kazakhstan

Participants from this group were asked to describe the reasons why they have chosen to remain in Kazakhstan:

“My daughter is finishing school next year. She plans to enter a Polish university, and that’s probably the main reason I’m still in Kazakhstan” (Respondent 1).

“I have a well-paying job in Kazakhstan, and my in-laws, who oppose relocation, live here” (Anatol Niegoda).

“For me and my family, it’s a safe and familiar place. The political and social environment allows us to choose to live here without discrimination. Also, we feel no strong ties to the historical homeland: our ancestors were deported from present-day Ukraine and spoke Surzhyk. We’re not even certain they were ethnically Polish” (Ana Maskievich).

“I lack sufficient proficiency in Polish, which would hinder integration and downgrade my civic status to that of a second-class citizen” (Respondent 2).

In response to the question of whether the participants had ever considered relocating to Poland, the following answers were given:

“Yes, I’ve long considered it. What held me back was a lack of reliable information on the procedures and the possibility of retaining my pension” (Respondent 1).

“Yes, I feel comfortable in Poland” (Anatol Niegoda).

“Yes, I’ve thought about it – alone and with my parents – because others in our family have done it. But for us, it’s more of a fallback option in case we’re forced to leave Kazakhstan. Until then, we are satisfied being part of the Kazakhstani Polonia” (Ana Maskievich).

“No opportunities to move have presented themselves” (Respondent 2).

In response to the question about which period of their life in Kazakhstan they considered the most difficult, the following answers were provided:

“The early 1990s” (Respondent 1).

“The 1990s” (Anatol Niegoda).

“If we’re talking about generations, then based on stories from my parents and grandparents – and my own experience – I would say there has not been a particularly difficult period. Kazakhstan provides enough freedom to avoid feeling burdened by living here” (Ana Maskievich).

As with the first group, the limited sample size precludes statistically significant conclusions. Nevertheless, two respondents identified the 1990s as the most difficult period in their lives – an assessment consistent with that of the repatriated group. The reasons given for remaining in Kazakhstan included close family ties, stable employment, and the perception of migration as a possible, though not urgent, option. These responses reflect both emotional and practical attachments to Kazakhstan. All respondents had, at some point, contemplated migration.

One respondent indicated that relocation was not feasible due to a lack of opportunity. The knowledge that repatriation remains an ever-present and guaranteed option likely contributes to a sense of psychological security among members of the diaspora. The decision to remain in Kazakhstan also appears to be economically justified. One respondent remarked that, for her family, identification as members of the Polish diaspora in Kazakhstan was itself a source of cultural fulfilment.

## Conclusion

The economic and political developments in Kazakhstan since the country's independence in 1991 have impacted the Polish minority in much the same way as the broader population – albeit against a backdrop of historically rooted disadvantages, including the deprivation of basic civil rights that persisted until the 1970s.

The situation of the Polish community in Kazakhstan has been shaped by a complex interplay of both adverse and beneficial factors. Based on the conducted analysis, the following key factors can be identified:

Negative factors: Severe economic conditions during the early years of Kazakhstan's independence; Initial disenfranchisement, including restrictions on settlement in urban centres, which limited access to economic and social opportunities.

Positive factors: The right to establish cultural centres and publish Polish-language periodicals; The opportunity to study the Polish language in secondary schools; Institutional support from the Embassy and Consulates of the Republic of Poland in Kazakhstan, as well as Polish organisations following the establishment of diplomatic relations; The development of economic cooperation between Kazakhstan and Poland; The inclusion of the Polish diaspora in the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan; Access to archival materials related to political repression and opportunities for legal rehabilitation; The implementation of the “Pole's Card” (*Karta Polaka*) program.

The current condition of the Polish community in Kazakhstan requires further comprehensive research.

Based on the analysis of memoirs published in the *Алматырски Курьер* *Polonijny* and the survey findings presented above, it can be concluded that the economic hardships of the 1990s remain a central factor motivating ethnic Poles in Kazakhstan to participate in Poland's repatriation program and pursue emigration. Respondents frequently cited the hope for a better future for their children as a key reason for relocation. Another significant

factor shaping migration decisions is the ideological and institutional framework developed by the Polish government for engagement with its diaspora (*Polonia*), including a variety of repatriation and support programs aimed at facilitating return migration. The future decisions of Kazakhstani Poles regarding permanent relocation to Poland will likely depend on the evolution of Kazakhstan's economic conditions as well as broader regional political stability.

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