

# Ukrainian Ethno-Cultural Centers in Almaty City and Almatinskaya Oblast: Current Situation and Challenges

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Litvin, Daniil (2021) Ukrainian Ethno-Cultural Centers in Almaty City and Almatinskaya Oblast: Current Situation and Challenges. *Ukrainian Policymaker*, Volume 8, 51-60. <https://doi.org/10.29202/up/8/6>

*The ethnic Ukrainian population has been part of a multi-ethnic community of the Republic of Kazakhstan for a long time. After the period of emigration that occurred at the dawn of Kazakhstani independence, numerous ethno-cultural centers were created on the territory of Kazakhstan, becoming sources of empowerment and means of self-realization for various ethno-cultural communities in the Republic. This article indicates the role of Ukrainian ethno-cultural centers in Almaty city and Almatinskaya oblast in their threefold mission: support and maintaining of ethno-cultural identity of Ukrainians; realization of the Doctrine of National Unity of the Republic of Kazakhstan; and maintaining friendly relations between the Republic of Kazakhstan and Ukraine. The article is based on first-hand information about the day-to-day activity of ethno-cultural centers, including participatory observations and interviews with official representatives of those centers.*

*Keywords: Republic of Kazakhstan, markers of ethno-cultural identity, Ukrainians, ethno-cultural centers, Almaty and Oblast*

Received: 14 April 2021 / Accepted: 26 April 2021 / Published: 29 May 2021

## Introduction

Maintenance and effectiveness of ethno-cultural centers in the Republic of Kazakhstan is very much a live question of academic interests. They have been active since the establishment of the Assembly of People of Kazakhstan, and an inside perspective on their effectiveness is very much needed. Preliminary research has discovered that very little to no attention has been paid to the activity and current situation of Ukrainian ethno-cultural centers in Almaty city and Almatinskaya oblast. Ethno-cultural centers and the role they play in socio-political life of the Republic are unique and important specifics of the Republic of Kazakhstan, and their

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effectiveness should not be neglected in the context of realization of the Doctrine of National Unity, aimed at constructing harmonious and tolerant multi-cultural society in Kazakhstan, with heavy emphasis of what was qualified by researchers as “civic national identity” (Brubaker, 1996). And while officially those centers are very much involved in social activity, the overall number of ethnic Ukrainians in the Republic has been steadily decreasing over the past 20 years from 547,054 people, – 3,66% of the population, – in 1999 (Republic, 2013) to 263,962 people, – 1,42% of the population, in 2020 (Statistics Committee, 2020). This decline is signaling about present challenges ethno-cultural centers face on their path of maintaining welcoming and comfortable conditions, requesting more detailed research of their situation.

## **Materials and research methods**

Both secondary and primary data analysis was conducted during this research. Official documents on the activity of ethno-cultural centers, Doctrine of National Unity of the Republic of Kazakhstan, as well as various historical sources on the waves of Ukrainian migration into Kazakhstan and statistical data on their current numbers were used to provide background information on the matter, as well as to illuminate the context of Ukrainian ethno-cultural community in the Republic. Participatory observations and interviews with official representatives of those ethno-cultural centers were conducted in order to analyze the current situation in those centers, view the level of involvement of Ukrainian ethno-cultural community representatives in their activity. Additional institutions that are involved in the activity of those centers or cooperate with them in any way (local Greek Catholic Church, as well as Ukrainian Embassy to the Republic of Kazakhstan) were visited and observed as well. Said methodologies were chosen out of desire to achieve the desired level of objectivity in revealing challenges centers might face: participatory observation was chosen as the method that can provide the most in-depth knowledge of the ongoing process, participant statistic and level of activity involvement within researched centers (Crossman, 2019); and interviews with leaders of centers were conducted for the purpose of gathering the more professionalized opinion on the matter, as well as perspectives of future development of said centers and heads’ opinion on challenges ethno-cultural centers currently face (Thompson, 2016). All participatory observations were conducted upon the agreement with the leaders of said communities; all interviewees have been properly informed about the nature and purpose of this research and expressed their oral agreement to willingly contribute to it.

## **Discussion**

One of many ways ethno-cultural communities in Kazakhstan can realize their potential is the system of ethno-cultural centers. Ukrainian ethno-cultural centers, the primal targets of this research, serve not only as meeting points of ethnic communities in the Republic of Kazakhstan, but also represent the unique ethno-social structure that was created on the territory of this country for the sake of ethnic peace’ preservation, and harmonious development. This structure exists under the umbrella of the Assembly of People of Kazakhstan, and operates in accordance with the Kazakhstani model of ethnic tolerance expressed in the official Doctrine of National Unity (Assembly, 2021). Among the foundational principles, inter-ethnic peace and solidarity are combined with civic identity-building mentioned in this doctrine. It is claimed that the peaceful co-existence of different ethnic groups on the territory of Kazakhstan comes from the natural tolerance of Kazakh people towards them, but vice versa – that that

tolerance per se was formed by the long-lasting period of coexisting with others on the same territory. This doctrine also underlines the inter-ethnic dialogue as a reliable root of enrichment of Kazakhstani culture for the benefit of all. This doctrine is the main guiding principle of the state national policy of Kazakhstan, within the framework of which the Assembly of People of Kazakhstan was formed in 1995 (Official, 2021).

It must also be noted that, since the year 1995, the Assembly's name has changed from Assembly of Peoples of Kazakhstan to the Assembly of People of Kazakhstan – to underline once more the fundamental idea of national unity in ethnic diversity, reflected in the Doctrine (Zhetpysbayev, 2016). Under this umbrella of APK, various different subcommittees exist – from Scientific Expert Council to Fund of APK, – but one of the most important tools of its doctrine realization is Republican Ethno-Cultural Unions (republican level) and Ethno-Cultural Centers (oblast level) that are structurally subjugated to them. The positive effect of the activity of APK has been underlined by international organizations on the highest level as an example to be followed internationally (Ban, 2010).

Ukrainians also have their own unions and centers in the Republic of Kazakhstan – mainly, there is an association of legal entities “Рада Українців Казахстану” (*Council of Ukrainians of Kazakhstan*); the headquarters are located in the capital city of Nur-Sultan. Among its stated goals, there is the reinforcement of national unity, formation of Kazakhstani identity, and encouragement of ethno-cultural association representatives' participation in the civil society development (Assembly, 2021).

Almatinskaya oblast is presenting an interesting case due to its generally multi-cultural nature – and, therefore, can serve as a model of a Kazakhstani society in which ethno-cultural centers should be thriving; therefore, it was chosen as the main territorial area of this research. There are currently two ethno-cultural centers, operating on a city and oblast level respectively: Ukrainian Cultural Center, headed by Agapova Tamara Alexeevna, and Taras Shevchenko Regional Ukrainian Cultural Centre “Prosvita Zhetisu,” headed by Duras Mykola Fedorovich. They are all recognized as ethno-cultural centers by the Republic of Kazakhstan and as “Ukrainian associations” by Ukraine (Ukrainian Embassy, 2017) as a bridge of international dialogue between two states.

## **Results of the research**

Research of the historical background of Ukrainian ethno-cultural centers proved the extremely diverse nature of the Ukrainian ethno-cultural community in Kazakhstan. History of their appearance on this land, as in case of any other ethnic community, differs from family to family – some Ukrainians are the descendants of Haidamaks sent here into exile by Tsarist Russia after the suppression of peasants revolts in Right-bank Ukraine in the middle of 18 century; others are tracing their bloodline to Tsarist settlers from Ukrainian parts of the Empire, attracted by economic perspectives provided by at-that-time Russian Prime Minister Pyotr Stolypin. In the early Soviet period, the Ukrainian diaspora in Kazakhstani territory was enlarged by a substantial amount of kulaks and Western Ukrainians exiled for their anti-Soviet position during periods of collectivization and annexation of Eastern Poland in 1939, respectively. Ukrainians constituted many volunteers who traveled to modern-day Kazakhstan's territory during the famous “Virgin Land” campaign (Bilan, 2017). Finally, some small percentage of modern-day Kazakhstani Ukrainians came here in the late Soviet period, when, out of economic or personal reasons, some families have been moving into Kazakh SSR

seeking for better job opportunities and application of their professional skills. Both different reasons for migration in Kazakhstan, different background and region of origin make the Ukrainian community extremely diverse in itself, although in official documents and during cultural events, they are usually regarded as a homogeneous and monolithic ethno-cultural community.

Before 1991, ethnic Ukrainians constituted about 5% of the overall Kazakhstani population; their fates were deeply intertwined with Kazakhs. However, even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the demographical situation has changed. A broader perspective shows us that percentage of the Ukrainian population in Kazakhstan is currently decreasing rapidly. In contrast, the overall population of the Republic steadily grows (Republic, 2013). A brief overview of the pool of academic research on the matter reveals that this specific case of Ukrainian diaspora lacking deep and comprehensive coverage from the international academia and reasons behind this demographic decline of the Ukrainian population has been unclear. Taking into consideration modern Kazakhstan's multi-cultural approach, with ethnic diversity and tolerance being the core values of Kazakhstani society, such disproportionate demographic decline of one of the culturally significant ethnic minority might raise questions about the efficiency of "Rukhani Zhangyru" policy implications and inclusiveness of new "Kazakhstani" identity. However, the decrease of the Ukrainian population in Kazakhstan can also be explained through different causes: it can simply be natural aging and graduate extinction of the ethnic group, willing emigration or repatriation to Ukraine, or even indirect discrimination caused by official policies. One is certain – despite the official governmental approach of tolerance and multiculturalism, current conditions in the Republic are not preventing the Ukrainian population from declining.

During personal interviews, few challenges became clear – first of all, most of the financial matters of those ethno-cultural centers are covered by voluntary donations from the regular members of those same centers (Lebid L., personal communication, March 13, 2021). Those donations cover ethnic clothes for chorus "Ukraine," operating in the regional ethno-cultural center's custody, as well as organizational matters of planned events. Secondly, the challenge of insignificant independent activity came to the attention. While the regional ethno-cultural center has an official plan of events, revised and officially approved by the government officials, the city center is less numerous and usually participates in programs organized by other, better-organized and financially more stable cultural centers – one of the examples of such case is the observed event, dedicated to the Day of Gratitude, conducted by Cossack Ethno-Cultural center on March 1, 2020, where Ukrainian cultural community was represented by five people and did not have its own cultural program, jumping on the bandwagon of organizers. The very few events that were and still are organized regularly by the Ukrainian Ethno-cultural center of Almaty city are Shevchenko readings and Sunday Schools – and while the first one received a certain amount of attendance in 2020, the latter ones are not that popular among the people (Agapova T., personal communication, March 1, 2020).

One of the other challenges revealed by the participatory observation was the substantial lack of the younger generation – most of the people actively participating in the activities of those ethno-cultural centers are mature and senior citizens. At the same time, children and students are not represented. This can signal the overall aging of those centers and inability to ensure cultural continuity due to lack of effective means of communication with the younger generation – which is drastically diminishing the effectiveness of said cultural centers, which, with little involvement of the younger audience, are incapable of ensuring the continuity of the

values of multi-ethnic peace and tolerant co-existence. However, positive sides must also be mentioned – those centers follow the Doctrine of National Unity provisions thoroughly, their compliance with the general ideas of inter-ethnic peace, inclusiveness and tolerance is clear in both official documents and public events held by those centers. They closely cooperate with other ethno-cultural centers to ensure the correct reflection of the multi-cultural face of Kazakhstani society (Agapova T., personal communication, March 1, 2020), and use every opportunity to promote those tolerant values during their events (Lebid L., personal communication, March 13, 2021).

Considering that participatory observation was one of the supportive methodologies utilized in this research, it would be fitting to provide at least a brief overview of involvement in those centers' activities. It must be admitted that the coronavirus pandemic that started in the March of 2020 caused most of the regular events organized by those institutions and all previously planned anniversaries and public celebrations to be either postponed or closed. However, because this research and preparation process for effective participatory observation started earlier, beginning from January 2020, I have been able not only to attend those events that happened to occur before the lockdown, but to keep track of all future zoom conference dates, meetings (with the maintenance of social distancing) and other events that were organized upon agreement with government officials of Almaty city since. During those observations, it was discovered that members of Ukrainian ethno-cultural centers also differ in terms of religion – while the majority of them identify as Orthodox, there is a minority of Greek Catholics present here. Following the recommendations from the leader of the city ethno-cultural center (Agapova T., personal communication, March 1, 2020), I decided to research the religious aspect of this community as well, hoping to search for answers to the questions this research asked.

The nature of Greek (or Byzantium) Catholicism remains to be a Terra Incognita for non-theological researchers, and for a good reason – out of all 1.3 billion Catholics in the world, those who follow Byzantine Rite, traditional for the spiritual legacy of Constantinople and Byzantium Empire, comprise only 8.2 million – less than 1% (Holy See Press Office, 2020). However, members of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church constitute the overwhelming majority of that percent – 5.5 million people (Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church, 2021). Members of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, the vast majority of whom are settled on the territory of Western Ukraine, trace their historical tradition back to the days of Brest Synod of 1595, when Orthodox bishops of present-day Ukraine addressed Pope Clement VIII on the matter of their reunion with the Catholic Church. This decision was in no least part dictated by the fact that by that time, Ukrainian territory and its people were under the heavy influence of Catholic Poland, and it was vital for the sake of preservation of people's traditions and escaping persecution and violent conversion (Orthodox were viewed as second-class citizens by Poles at that historical point) to seek protection from the Pope. As the result of this union, a Ruthenian Uniate Church was born, which would later become what it is today – a largest Byzantium Rite Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (Mirtshuk, 1931). The price for that union was acceptance of theological teaching of Roman Catholic Church, as well as the supremacy of the Pope – but at the same time, Greek (or “Byzantium”) Catholics were allowed to preserve their own administrative structure as well as Byzantium rite of Divine Liturgy. Many outsiders mistaken them for ordinary Eastern Orthodox for the reason that there are very few visible differences between the two – architecture of the churches, the way the sign of the cross is made (from right to left shoulder), and even the Order of the Liturgy are mostly the same as in the Orthodox Church.

One final fact to add before explaining how this part of Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church history is important for this research is that the Soviet power officially liquidated the Church in 1946. Most of its bishops were arrested and another way politically persecuted (Dirscherl, 1970). This was the period when those members of the clergy, along with other political prisoners, were sent to the camps – many of which were on the territory of modern-day Kazakhstan.

The majority of those deported Ukrainians were living in Karaganda, which eventually became a so-called “spiritual capital” of Greek Catholics in Kazakhstan (GCatholic, 2021). Until today, this history of religious persecution is deeply intertwined with the local Byzantium Catholic community – for instance, ethnic Ukrainians of the Karlag prison camp were Byzantium Catholics deported from Western Ukraine (Department, 2020). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, official representatives of the reborn Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church started arriving in Kazakhstan with missionary purposes, renewing contacts with their brothers in faith here. Historically, it must also be noted that followers of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church were treated by the Russian Orthodox Church as a “schismatic traitors” who broke their historical ties with Orthodoxy (Fedyk, 2015). ROC is extremely influential on the post-Soviet territory, not to the least partly by the fact that their position is politically secured by Russian cultural influence on the territory of Kazakhstan (Shevchenko, 2015). Those two factors combined resulted in the present-day state of Byzantium Catholics in Kazakhstan – while they do not belong to any of the existing territorial dioceses or episcopates (territorial-administrative units) of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (GCatholic, 2021) for the sake of avoiding confrontation with much more influential Metropolitan District of the Russian Orthodox Church in the Republic of Kazakhstan, they operate under the direct jurisdiction of Apostolic Administration of the Holy See. This fairly recent decision (Sakun, 2020) was welcomed by local Byzantium Catholics, including those that live in Almaty.

Therefore, the local Ukrainian Greek Catholic community in Almaty oblast is represented by one parish currently residing in the Roman Catholic Cathedral of Holy Trinity, located at Tlendiyeva st. 9. Their liturgy is conducted regularly every Sunday, from 13:00 till 14:00, and the Ukrainian community usually gathers together afterward to socialize. This religious community is headed by Father Oleh Halushka, who is mainly in charge of religious matters, while his wife holds matters of organizing events, maintaining contacts with different members of this community and other social duties, yimost (religious term, defining wife of a priest and can be vaguely translated as “mother”) Miroslava Halushka. Although not included in the official structure of the Assembly due to the religious nature of its activity, this community also cooperates with ethno-cultural centers, although mostly sporadically – this cooperation usually takes the form of either ethno-cultural center’s members visiting this parish for the purpose of satisfying religious needs or representatives of this religious structures being present on the events organized by said centers.

While examining the final dimension of the ethno-cultural centers’ activity, serving as a bridge of intercultural dialogue and cooperation between Ukraine and Kazakhstan, it is needed to mention their cooperation with the Ukrainian Embassy. It seemingly has a very little impact on the social and cultural life of the Ukrainian ethno-cultural community in Kazakhstan due to its strict diplomatic nature. It is usually ethnic Ukrainians themselves and people related to the activity of their ethno-cultural centers that become interested and involved in their public projects. Although it is more common for the Embassy to make official stands on the international matters between states (Ukrainian Embassy, 2020), organizing business

forums (Ukrainian Embassy, 2019), or acknowledging the point of common historical events (Ukrainian Embassy, 2019), there are also ways in which it communicates with ethno-cultural communities – traditionally, in the form of an annual event called “dictation of national unity” (Ukrainian Embassy, 2020). One of the most significant public statements that were made by the Embassy so far in regards to the local ethno-cultural community is the letter of Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Ukraine to the Republic of Kazakhstan Ivan Kuleba (who stayed in that position until January 2020), from June 20 2018, in which he addressed the leaders of ethno-cultural communities and “compatriots” (*співвітчизники*), stating that he is open to dialog and propositions about further cooperation (Ukrainian Embassy, 2018). Practically, however, most of the ties and connections that existed between Ukrainian ethno-cultural communities in Almaty oblast were established via Consulate – and were either weakened substantially or broken entirely since abovementioned Consulate was moved to the capital city of Nur-Sultan in 2014, as it was stated during my participatory observations of various members of said community. Since then, only two conferences were held (see the corresponding appendix) in which Ukrainian ethno-cultural centers’ representatives participated directly. Most of the contacts between the Embassy and local Ukrainian ethno-cultural centers are coordinated and organized via the First Secretary of the Embassy, Taras Bunisevich, and Consul Ivan Almashi. They have a strictly cultural or educational nature.

Overall, it can be said that the parish of Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church was less affected by the recent COVID outbreak in terms of meeting organizations due to the fact that they operate under the regulation of religious objects’ activity, which was less strict for some parts – for instance, Catholics were allowed to gather for Christmas celebration (Krishtop, 2020), and Sunday masses, in general, were conducted regularly. However, this part of the Ukrainian community is probably the least numerous one in terms of involvement of Kazakhstani Ukrainians – as both participatory observation and interview taken from yimost suggests, the local Greek Catholic parish attracts predominantly Ukrainian citizens from Western Ukraine who are currently employed on the territory of Almaty city (Halushka, M., personal communication, March 28, 2020). Perspectives of its growth are few, predominantly due to the reason that the Russian Orthodox Church is very numerous and very influential on the territory of Almaty city and Almaty oblast, and so is any potential involvement of local, Kazakhstani Ukrainians – while Catholics are less popular among Slavic population, the fact that Russian Orthodox Church has been present in this oblast for longer period of time secured its position among local Slavic population, including Ukrainians.

Second in this scale goes regional Ukrainian Cultural Centre “Prosvita Zhetysu,” because the secretary of this center is a member of the UGCC parish and, therefore, was able to organize some events with the support and approval of Catholic clergy. Again, participatory observation has provided me with the opportunity to view this community from within – and out of 30 claimed regular members (Lebid L., personal communication, March 13, 2021), the younger generation was not represented by any of them, except for Lebid’s own grandchildren, once more underlining the main challenge Ukrainian ethno-cultural centers face. From the organizational point of view, this center is the most bureaucratically organized one. For instance, the acting secretary provided me with plans on its activity, the official center’s passport information and registration.

Almaty city’s ethno-cultural center and Ukrainian Embassy were the least active in terms of organizing events, even in an online format – since January 2020, they organized only three events overall, two of which were conducted online. The city center lacked any official

documentation to provide for this research, and very few things were said about any plans or perspectives of its activity (Agapova T., personal communication, March 1, 2020). Its members were almost all senior citizens, with once again spotted the absence of the young generation. Speaking of events – all major, public ones were organized by other ethno-cultural centers (Day of Gratitude, etc.), with Ukrainian representatives being on secondary position. The main reason for such low involvement – lack of substantial funding or lack of initiative due to the old age of its members – will remain to be questioned for further research.

## Conclusions

It can be said with certainty that Ukrainian ethno-cultural centers in the Almaty city and Almatinskaya oblast are facing certain challenges. Although officially being present in cultural and social life, their practical impact seems to be very low. One of the reasons for that might be the old age of all prominent leaders of said centers, their increased focus on the formalities, and the limited amount of available resources. While all their activities, both happened and planned, correspond with the ideas of the Doctrine of the National Unity and promote inter-ethnic peace and co-existence, the actual target audience of those activities is limited by aging members of those ethno-cultural centers themselves. Further research might be suggested to explore the financial matters of local ethno-cultural centers. Still, the amount of voluntary donations they receive right now to cover the expenses on national clothing creation, events organization, and other day-to-day matters can obviously hardly support any substantial impact on the life of the Ukrainian ethno-cultural community. The wide age gap between the official members of ethno-cultural centers and younger representatives of the Ukrainian ethno-cultural community challenges their ability to reach the target audience, resulting in the complete absence of the younger generation in said centers and their slow, but inevitable self-preoccupation. Those challenges result in a paradoxical situation when Ukrainian ethno-cultural centers in Almaty city and Almatinskaya oblast exist for their own sake. Their practically useful activity is having little to no effect on both the wider ethno-cultural community of Almatinskaya oblast and its general population. Although currently those centers successfully complete all three of their missions – they maintain Ukrainian ethno-cultural identity, promote the ideals of the Doctrine of National Unity and serve as a bridge between two countries, abovementioned challenges pose a threat to all of those missions in the long-term perspective, and solutions to them must be found.

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