

Astana praised as the ‘capital of Central Asia’

By Georgi Gotev

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An international conference was held in Astana on Tuesday (5 June) to mark the 20th anniversary of Kazakhstan’s new capital. Dubbed Tselinograd during Soviet times, it was renamed Astana (meaning *capital city* in Kazakh) in 1998 and is now rebranding itself as a go-to venue for international mediation talks.

On 10 June 1998, Astana was presented to the world as the new capital city. Modern Astana is a planned settlement, like Brasília in Brazil or Canberra in Australia. The master plan was designed by Japanese architect Kisho Kurokawa.

Since 1998, a lot has been invested and today’s skyline is dominated by many futuristic buildings.

Astana grew exponentially and now has around a million inhabitants, making it the second largest city in Kazakhstan after the former capital Almaty.

To foreign visitors, the general impression is that the city has developed very fast in terms of iconic buildings, which is without a doubt a big nation-building effort.

Many of the new buildings are the work of world-famous architects and are an attraction by themselves. At the same time, there is not yet a metro, the number of bridges over the Ishim river is obviously insufficient, traffic jams are frequent and parking spaces are not always available.

Security is good and there are several recreational areas full of young people. Although a number of big mosques have been built, Kazakh society generally appears to remain secular.

Speaking at the conference, Kazakhstan's foreign minister, Kairat Abdrakhmanov, called Astana "a city to be proud of" for the Kazakhs.

For foreigners, he said, changes were visible each time they came to visit. He also said Astana has become a brand for international mediation. Indeed, the capital hosts international talks, such as the Syria talks, also known as the "Astana process".

Abdrakhmanov emphasised that Astana has ambitions to become the capital of the information community and society of Kazakhstan, be a "smart city for a smart nation" and a "megapolis comfortable for people".

Malika Erlanova, Astana's deputy mayor, argued that resources were used not only for building a capital but also indirectly for moving forward the country. The city budget has increased 25 times compared to 1997 in comparative prices, while the population increased more than threefold, she said.

Erlanova added that it was "a myth" that Astana is a city of civil servants: "It's a city of people working in small and medium-sized businesses, it's a city attracting more and more foreign investment", she said.

Around 60% of Astana's growth is generated by small and medium-size businesses and every third economically active person works for this sector, she said.

Erlanova said Astana contributes 12% to the country's GDP. More importantly, she said, the capital aims to move from quantitative to qualitative growth and become a smart and comfortable city.

She said the city authorities are studying the experience of similar cities in the world, like Amsterdam and Warsaw, in modernising infrastructure such as schools, hospitals and housing.

Another big goal, she said, was to open universities with curricula at world class level. As she explained, international experience shows that for a city of more than a million inhabitants, the right proportion is to have 10% of students so that the economy could count on enough young professionals to recruit from.

Erlanova said the city aimed to develop tourism, and particularly event tourism, by building congress centres, also banking on its location between Europe and Asia. The goal was to increase the number of foreign tourists to 1 million a year.

She said accommodation facilities were generally already in place, and the number of international flights to Astana was increasing. On 5 July the International Financial Centre of Astana will be inaugurated at the location of the former Expo 2017, giving

the possibility to neighbouring countries with a less developed financial infrastructure, to operate from there, she said.

The first 20 years were about infrastructure, the next will be about developing human capital, attracting foreign investment and creating comfortable conditions for life and work, Erlanova concluded.

'The new Geneva'

Dr Frank Albo, a professor at the University of Manitoba, Canada, made a passionate plea for Astana, which he called "the new Geneva of the 21st century" and "a United Nations of world architecture".

"Astana is like no other city on Earth", he said, arguing that symbolic messages in Astana's modern architecture provided solutions to what he said were the three most important issues of our time: religious harmony, nuclear disarmament and the sustainability of the planet.

Albo is the author of a book about Astana which focuses on the symbolism of Astana architecture, titled "Astana: Architecture, Myth & Destiny". It has been described by reviewers as "a book where Umberto Eco meets Robert Langdon meets Indiana Jones".

He insisted on the ancient roots of modern Kazakhstan, telling the conference that close to Astana lay the lands where people first domesticated horses 5,500 years ago, that it was also home to the wheel and axe and the proto-Indo-European language, which then become the basis for Greek, Latin, Sanscrit and all modern languages of Western Europe, including English.

"Astana formulates an entirely new doctrine of city planning: one that marries the past with the future, East with the West, and brings together the ecological preservation of the environment from nomadic notions inherited, from adaptability, discovery, pluralism and exchange," Albo said.

Dejan Stancer, the president of the Kazakh-Slovenian Business Club (KSBC), provided insights into business opportunities in Kazakhstan. He said KSBC has gradually become the largest business club in the region and the regional representative of Kazakh Invest, the country's national company for investment support and promotion, for central and south-eastern Europe.

"We intend to connect central and south-eastern Europe with Central Asia and to strengthen economic activities, but also ties between our people", he said. "To us, Astana is already the capital of Central Asia and all economic operations within the entire region we will lead from here," he added.