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CASE STUDY OF SINGLE-INDUSTRY TOWNS IN EAST KAZAKHSTAN

Abstract

This article presents an analytical study of the state policy of the socio-economic development and problems of single-industry towns. The study covers four cities in Eastern Kazakhstan: Ridder, Serebryansk, Altai and Kurchatov. It examines the infrastructural conditions, the socio-economic dynamics and the interdependence between the socio-economic situation of these cities and the activities of urban enterprises. The study identifies key issues such as deteriorating infrastructure, economic stagnation, labor market problems and demographic shifts.

The article pays particular attention to the influence of economic and social factors on the development trajectories of these cities, including targeted public policies and private investment initiatives. The authors analyze current efforts under national and regional development programs, assess their effectiveness and identify areas for improvement.

The findings highlight the difficulty of maintaining socio-economic stability in cities dependent on a single industry. It is worth noting that the study is limited by sample size and focuses exclusively on four cities, which limits the wider applicability of its findings.

In addition, the article discusses the limitations of the current study and suggests directions for future research, which include a wider range of single-industry cities in different regions of Kazakhstan and beyond.

Keywords: urbanization, single-industry towns, migration, labor market, social infrastructure, targeted regional programs

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ШЫҒЫС ҚАЗАҚСТАННЫҢ МОНОҚАЛАЛАРЫ БОЙЫНША КЕЙС-СТАДИ

Аңдатпа

Мақалада әлеуметтік-экономикалық даму саласындағы мемлекеттік саясатты және моноқалалардың проблемаларын талдамалық зерттеу ұсынылған. Зерттеу барысында Шығыс Қазақстанның төрт қаласы қарастырылады: Риддер, Серебрянск, Алтай және Курчатов. Онда инфрақұрылымдық жағдайлар, әлеуметтік-экономикалық динамика және осы қалалардың әлеуметтік-экономикалық жағдайы мен қала құраушы кәсіпорындардың қызметі арасындағы өзара тәуелділік қарастырылады. Зерттеу инфрақұрылымның нашарлауы, экономикалық тоқырау, еңбек нарығындағы проблемалар және демографиялық өзгерістер сияқты негізгі мәселелерді анықтады.

Мақалада экономикалық және әлеуметтік факторлардың осы қалалардың даму траекторияларына, соның ішінде мемлекеттік саясаттың мақсатты шаралары мен жеке инвестициялық бастамаларға әсеріне ерекше назар аударылады. Ұлттық және аймақтық даму бағдарламаларындағы ағымдағы күш-жігерді талдай отырып, авторлар олардың тиімділігін бағалайды және жақсартуды қажет ететін салаларды анықтайды.

Нәтижелер бір салаға тәуелді қалаларда әлеуметтік-экономикалық тұрақтылықты сақтаудың қиындығын көрсетеді. Алайда зерттеу үлгі өлшемімен шектеледі және тек төрт қалаға бағытталған.

Сонымен қатар мақалада ағымдағы зерттеудің шектеулері талқыланады және болашақ зерттеулерге жолдамалар ұсынылады. Олар Қазақстанның әртүрлі өңірлерінде және одан тыс жерлерде моноқалалардың неғұрлым кең спектрін қамтиды.

Түйін сөздер: урбанизация, моноқалалар, миграция, еңбек нарығы, әлеуметтік инфрақұрылым, аймақтық бағдарламалар

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КЕЙС-СТАДИ МОНОГОРОДОВ ВОСТОЧНОГО КАЗАХСТАНА

Аннотация

В данной статье представлено аналитическое исследование государственной политики в области социально-экономического развития и проблем моногородов. В исследовании рассматриваются четыре города Восточного Казахстана: Риддер, Серебрянск, Алтай и Курчатов. В нем рассматриваются инфраструктурные условия, социально-экономическая динамика и взаимозависимость между социально-экономическим положением этих городов и деятельностью градообразующих предприятий. В исследовании определены ключевые проблемы, включая ухудшение состояния инфраструктуры, экономическую стагнацию, проблемы на рынке труда и демографические сдвиги.

Особое внимание в статье уделяется влиянию экономических и социальных факторов на траектории развития этих городов, в том числе целенаправленные меры государственной политики и частные инвестиционные инициативы. Анализируя текущие усилия в рамках национальных и региональных программ развития, авторы оценивают их эффективность и определяют области, требующие улучшения.

Полученные результаты демонстрируют сложность поддержания социально-экономической стабильности в городах, зависящих от одной отрасли. Стоит отметить, что исследование ограничено размером выборки и сосредоточено исключительно на четырех городах, что ограничивает более широкую применимость его выводов.

Кроме того, в статье обсуждаются ограничения текущего исследования и предлагаются направления для будущих исследований. Они включают в себя более широкий спектр моногородов в различных регионах Казахстана и за его пределами.

Ключевые слова: урбанизация, моногорода, миграция, рынок труда, социальная инфраструктура, целевые региональные программы

MAIN PART

The economic vulnerability of single-industry towns in Eastern Kazakhstan is a significant concern, given their reliance on city-forming enterprises. While diversification efforts are a crucial aspect of economic resilience, they remain underdeveloped, with varying degrees of success across towns

Despite a decline in population, the town of Ridder is experiencing a shortage of labor, while in Altai the demand for labor is in decline. The migration of workers has contributed to a widening of skill imbalances, with Kurchatov being a notable exception due to its specialization

The condition of urban infrastructure, particularly water, heating, and sewage systems, is severely compromised, exhibiting a wear level of 70–90%. The deterioration of infrastructure systems is a pervasive problem in all four cities. The retreat of urban enterprises from their social

and urban responsibilities following economic reforms has left these cities unable to maintain critical infrastructure. This has had a cascading effect on quality of life, investment attractiveness and long-term sustainable urbanism.

INTRODUCTION

Problems of sustainability of industrial single-industry towns are typical for many post-Soviet countries [1]. In Kazakhstan, single-industry towns play an important role in the economic and social framework for several reasons.

To begin with, these communities make substantial contributions to the nation's gross domestic product (GDP), especially in industry, which makes up a large part of the country's economy. By the end of 2023, the volume of industrial production in single-industry towns amounted to 40% of the country's industrial production [2].

Secondly, single-industry towns frequently comprise a substantial proportion of the population engaged in the primary industry.

Thirdly, the creation of towns focused on a single industry aid in promoting balanced regional growth throughout the country, which assists in diminishing the inequalities among various regions of Kazakhstan and encourages economic activity in underdeveloped areas.

In essence, the economic challenges faced by single-industry towns are linked to a limited range of economic activities, the potential for the emergence of an urban development initiative, along with the increased dependence on the local population and municipal budget on the operations of a city-forming enterprise [3]. Main factors that cause lowering the rate of economic growth in monotowns are irrelevance of material and managerial capabilities of local self-government, lowering of municipal income [4].

The Strategy "Kazakhstan-2050" identifies the necessity for the advancement of single-industry towns [5]. This subject is given particular consideration in the National Development Plan of the Republic of Kazakhstan until 2025, which emphasizes the importance of developing alternative industries to diversify the economy [6]. In a State of the Nation Address dated 1 September 2020, President of Kazakhstan K. Tokayev highlighted that "it is especially important to give "a second lease of life" to our single-industry towns" [7].

The Program for the Development of Single-Industry Towns of the Republic of Kazakhstan [8] provides a classification of single industry towns for a number of reasons.

First of all, the term "single-industry town" means a type of category in which a considerable amount of production and industrial workers in the age of active employment is engaged in one or two or more than two industrial complexes (20% or more) which has similar or same raw material and finishes products mass orientation (singleness). Such firms integrate all the economic and social activities present in the city.

Furthermore, The Program classifies single-industry towns by the two criteria – the economic profile and the present state of the city-forming activity.

The first example identifies cities that have a substantial presence of the extractive industry. The second criterion divides single-industry towns into three groups: those with operational city-forming enterprises, those with partially operational city-forming enterprises, and those without operational city-forming enterprises.

In 2022, 27 monotowns, of which 21 had manufacturing, 5 – mining, 1 – research center [9] were home to 1.559 million people, or 7.85% of the country's population [10]. Currently, there are 20 monotowns in Kazakhstan according to the order of the Minister of National Economy [11]. Some have revitalized through economic transformations, such as Saran and Tekeli, while others lost their status [12].

The Comprehensive Development Plan (CDP) of East Kazakhstan's single-industry towns is fundamentally based on the Republican Program's classification scheme. However, it would be wise to recommend developing a more thorough typology of single-industry towns, particularly in relation to East Kazakhstan. This will make it easier to create and carry out a customized regional plan for the growth of communities with a particular sector.

Novelty. The article offers an extensive classification of single-industry towns in Eastern Kazakhstan, covering historical, economic, and social aspects. This typology not only categorizes towns based on their industrial profiles but also considers their historical origins, socio-economic transformations, and current challenges, thereby providing a multifaceted understanding of their development trajectories.

A comparative analysis of four case studies reveals overarching issues such as infrastructure deterioration, demographic shifts, and labor market challenges. These findings contribute to a broader understanding of the systemic problems faced by single-industry towns in Kazakhstan.

The study delineates particular constraints, including the concentration on a restricted number of towns, and suggests avenues for future research.

METHODOLOGY

The study utilized research methods that were formulated to thoroughly examine the socio-economic and infrastructure dynamics of towns focused on one industry located in one economic and geographical region – Eastern Kazakhstan, which was divided into two regions in 2022 as a result of administrative and territorial reform - Abai oblast and East Kazakhstan oblast.

Four specific case studies were selected for in-depth examination: Ridder, Serebryansk (included despite the loss of the status of a single-industry city in 2023 due to the closure of the city-forming enterprise for representativeness and due to the presence of a similar development program), Altai, and Kurchatov.

The method of statistical data analysis is used as the main research method. In addition, the following are used:

1. Regional Typology. The adoption of a regional typology framework represents a pivotal methodological choice for the study. By classifying single-industry towns according to historical, economic, and social factors, the study presents an organized method for comprehending the challenges presented in each town.

2. Case Study Method. Choosing four towns as case studies enables a thorough examination of particular local dynamics and issues. Employing case studies offers valuable, contextual information crucial for grasping the interaction of local and systemic elements, including labor market dynamics, infrastructure decline, and demographic changes.

3. Comparative Analysis. A comparative analysis of the selected towns enables the identification of both shared issues and distinctive patterns.

4. Multidimensional Framework. The research employs a multidimensional framework that integrates historical, economic, and social factors.

5. Quantitative and Qualitative Data Integration. The study integrates both quantitative data (e.g., demographic trends, labor market statistics) and qualitative insights (e.g., historical context, policy impacts). Quantitative data provide measurable indicators of socio-economic conditions, enabling comparisons and trend analysis. Qualitative insights, on the other hand, add depth to the understanding of local contexts, uncovering underlying causes and potential solutions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In terms of historical and cultural specifics, cities with a long and rather rich history can be distinguished. These consist of Ridder (created in 1786) and Altai (1791), which were established and focused on pre-Soviet eras, along with towns that developed during the Soviet era concerning industrial growth or the military-industrial complex, like Serebryansk (1953) and Kurchatov (1947).

Table 1. Population of Ridder

Year	Population
1999	65,116
2009	58,916
2021	52,555
2023	52,068
2024	51,380

Sources: *citypopulation.de*,
Bureau of National statistics

The historical roots of single-industry towns are not considered in the Republic Program or the KPR. Nonetheless, this element holds significant value for community engagement and educational initiatives with the local residents, along with the creation of communication strategies. In Altai and Ridder, the historical origins aid in fostering a more cohesive and connected local community.

The different historical trajectories of East Kazakhstan's single-industry cities have a significant impact on their current development challenges. Cities such as Serebryansk and Kurchatov, which were shaped primarily during the Soviet era, face the continuing effects of the post-Soviet transition, including infrastructure deterioration and industrial decline. In Serebryansk, water supply networks deterioration marks 91%, heat supply networks – 80%, road surface – 75%. However, the same situation can be seen in other analyzed towns. In Altai, water supply networks deterioration marks 86%, heat supply networks – 87% [13].

Table 2. Population of Altai

Year	Population
1979	51,132
1989	52,838
1999	43,894
2009	39,320
2021	36,360
2023	36,071
2024	35,619

Sources: *citypopulation.de*,
Bureau of National statistics

The lack of focus on historical origins in national and regional development programs also hinders effective social and cultural engagement, undermining efforts to revitalize these cities.

The impact of economic and political reforms is clearly observable in the single-industry towns of East Kazakhstan, which can be categorized into two groups based on the extent of these reforms' effects.

The first group includes Ridder and Altai. Besides the general difficulties associated with the market transition in Kazakhstan and other post-Soviet states, the most significant negative outcome has been the withdrawal of city-forming enterprises from their role in maintaining both social and urban infrastructure. In Ridder, one in four able-bodied residents works at a city-forming enterprise – Kazzinc.

The second group consists of Kurchatov and Serebryansk. In Kurchatov's case, the cessation of its primary function – operating the nuclear test site – led to complete socio-economic stagnation, with the city's population decreasing by a factor of seven. However, through the implementation of swift political measures aimed at converting its military-scientific capacity into a scientific-

industrial base, Kurchatov has managed to avoid the fate of becoming a "dead city." In contrast, Serebryansk is still in a state of prolonged decline and uncertainty. The city is undergoing a significant shift toward an agrarian economy, with the self-employed now forming the dominant demographic group. By the end of 2022, the city's population was 7.2 thousand people, and the workforce was 3.1 thousand people, or 43.1% of the total population [13].

Table 3. Population of Kurchatov

Year	Population
1999	9,305
2009	10,127
2021	10,411
2023	10,465
2024	10,253

*Sources: citypopulation.de,
Bureau of National statistics*

The specialization and diversification of the economy in single-industry towns can be categorized into two groups based on their development trajectories:

Single-industry towns with relatively successful specialization: The primary focus here is on strengthening and expanding the existing specialization, with economic diversification playing a supportive role in ensuring long-term social sustainability. In these towns, the challenges of diversifying the economy and creating new employment opportunities are particularly critical, as they are essential for the towns' survival and growth.

Ridder and Kurchatov are proposed to belong to this first group. Despite some fluctuations during the recent economic downturn, Ridder has demonstrated a positive development trend, particularly in the growth of its city-forming industries. These enterprises not only maintain employment levels but are also undergoing modernization and expansion, creating a foundation for economic diversification. Meanwhile, Kurchatov, following its severe socio-economic disruptions, is now experiencing an intensive phase of restructuring and the formation of a new socio-economic identity.

Single-industry towns facing greater challenges in diversification: This group includes Altai and Serebryansk. Altai faces a major obstacle in the depletion of its mineral resources, which have traditionally supported the city-forming industries. The future prospects for new resource exploration remain uncertain, highlighting the urgent need for the development of new industries capable of absorbing labor and meeting market demands. Among the most promising sectors for Altai's economic revitalization are tourism, agricultural product processing, and the food industry.

In the case of Serebryansk, experts suggest that the most viable solution would be to establish new production facilities oriented towards market needs, particularly those based on the city's specialized natural resources. This would help reorient the local economy and create sustainable employment opportunities.

Table 4. Population of Serebryansk

Year	Population
2010	9,568
2023	7,117
2024	6,954

*Sources: State Archive
of the East Kazakhstan region,
Bureau of National statistics*

The challenges faced by single-industry cities stem from economic factors such as dependence on city-forming enterprises, lack of diversification and depletion of natural resources. Ridder and Kurchatov, classified as relatively successful in specialization, have managed to modernize their industries to some extent. However, Altai is facing declining industrial output due to resource depletion, while Serebryansk is struggling to transform its economy, with the city's enterprises in a prolonged state of stagnation. Over-reliance on mono-industrial models exacerbates vulnerability to market shifts and external economic pressures.

The role of city-forming enterprises in fostering the development of small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) in single-industry towns of Eastern Kazakhstan warrants further analysis. It is helpful to differentiate between two distinct groups of towns in this context. The first group includes cities where city-forming enterprises can significantly contribute to the growth of SMEs, while the second group consists of cities where the development of SMEs is more likely to thrive outside the direct influence of these enterprises.

The first group could include Ridder and Altai. In these towns, city-forming enterprises have considerable potential to establish subsidiary small and medium-sized businesses aligned with their production needs. Additionally, they can encourage the growth of independent SMEs by prioritizing local orders within their single-industry sectors, thereby stimulating broader economic activity.

On the other hand, Kurchatov and Serebryansk represent towns in the second group. While Kurchatov has seen successful developments in the National Nuclear Center, the highly specialized nature of the center limits its capacity to foster a broader SME ecosystem. The city's technological focus and sectoral specificity restrict the potential for SMEs to develop in areas unrelated to its core activities. Similarly, in Serebryansk, where there are 296 SMEs, most of which are engaged in the field of food, catering and transportation [13], the existing industrial currently lacks the ability to generate or support new production, economic, or service-oriented enterprises outside of its specialized framework, further limiting the scope for SME development.

The nature of employment, demographic trends, and migration patterns in single-industry towns reveal distinct challenges and dynamics, as seen in both local and international contexts. Flexible employment forms, such as freelancing, temporary labor, and shift work, have proven crucial in supporting effective labor markets in such towns [14]. Based on this framework, each of the single-industry towns in East Kazakhstan can be seen as a unique case.

In Ridder, despite ongoing population decline, city-forming enterprises are facing a significant labor shortage. To address this, businesses are resorting to the temporary importation of labor from nearby villages on an as-needed basis. In Altai, the population outflow is coupled with a decreased demand for labor, reflecting a broader economic contraction. The mobility of the workforce in both Ridder and Altai is notably constrained by the poor working conditions and low wages offered by the city-forming enterprises.

Serebryansk, in turn, has experienced a long-term population decline primarily due to the prolonged lack of employment opportunities. In contrast, Kurchatov stands out as the only city in the region that has seen population growth in recent years. This growth is largely attributed to the influx of specialists drawn to the city's advanced scientific and technological infrastructure. However, the majority of the population increase is driven by migration, indicating that external factors play a significant role in Kurchatov's demographic shift.

It is worth mentioning that the authorities, realizing the importance of single-industry towns and at the same time taking into account the problems of these towns, approve programs for their socio-economic development. In 2023, Comprehensive plans for the socio-economic development of the towns of Ridder, Altai, and Serebryansk were approved. These plans are aimed at developing SMEs, modernizing infrastructure, and improving living standards. Such individual approach allows to consider all the specifics of one or another town.

Table 5. Percentage of self-employed in single-industry towns

Town	Percentage of self-employed, %
Altai	8
Ridder	7
Kurchatov	5
Serebryansk	6

Sources: Bureau of National statistics

Generally, the cities of Ridder, Serebryansk and Kurchatov can be considered to exhibit characteristics of relative urban instability, given that they have experienced a population decline of over 5%. In contrast, the city of Altai can be viewed as a relatively stable single-industry town, given that the outflow of population is less than 5% [15].

The labor market in these cities reflects the complex interplay of economic challenges and demographic trends. Ridder and Altai face labor shortages despite population decline, mainly due to poor working conditions and inadequate wages. Conversely, Serebryansk suffers from persistent unemployment and demographic stagnation. Migration patterns and declining birth rates further strain the socio-economic fabric of these cities and limit their development potential.

One of the approaches to the development of single-industry towns is the introduction of national and regional government programs to develop the territory's infrastructure, retrain the population, and improve the environment and urban environment [16]. In this regard, based on the example of the selected cities, the government traces the transition from the establishment of common programs for the development of single-industry towns to an individual approach to each one.

CONCLUSION

It can be stated that the current state of urbanization in Kazakhstan is a complex and multi-layered process, which is determined by a multitude of factors. The economic, political and social aspects of urbanization interact with one another, forming a distinctive picture of the development of cities and urban agglomerations.

Economic factors assume a pivotal role in the process of urbanization. A notable feature of Kazakhstan's urbanization process is the high proportion of investments allocated to infrastructure projects, including the construction of roads, bridges and housing complexes. Furthermore, the expansion of the oil, gas and mining industries attracts considerable investment and generates employment opportunities, which also contribute to urbanization.

The policy of decentralization and regional development contributes to the uniform development of cities and the reduction of disparities between the capital and the periphery. Furthermore, government programs designed to support the growth of small and medium-sized businesses also contribute to the creation of new employment opportunities and the advancement of the urban economy.

The growth of the urban population gives rise to changes in the social structure, which in turn necessitates the development of education, healthcare and housing construction. The education and healthcare systems in Kazakhstan are undergoing significant expansion, which is attracting young people and specialists to cities. Social mobility and migration also exert an influence on the processes of urbanization. Internal migration from rural areas to cities is driven by the search for superior economic opportunities, access to quality services and improved living conditions.

In response to the socio-economic challenges and opportunities encountered by single-industry towns in Eastern Kazakhstan, the following recommendations are proposed;

1. To lessen reliance on city-forming enterprises, it is essential to invest in the development of new industries, including tourism, agriculture, renewable energy, and various service sectors;

2. In order to facilitate access to financing, training, and networking opportunities, provide support to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). This support should be directed particularly towards SMEs that are not already influenced by city-forming enterprises;

3. To enhance the quality of life, repair and modernize water, heating and sewage systems;

4. In order to address the issue of labor shortages, introduce incentive programs designed to attract and retain skilled workers. Such programs could include the provision of housing subsidies and competitive wages;

5. Develop targeted regional programs. These programs should take the form of bespoke strategies for single-industry towns, reflecting the unique challenges and development potential of each such area;

6. To enhance the quality of life for residents of single-industry towns, develop recreational, cultural, and educational facilities.

This study highlights the importance of tailored, evidence-based approaches to address the challenges faced by single-industry towns. The findings provide a foundation for policymakers, urban planners, and investors to develop more sustainable and resilient urban economies. The practical significance lies in its potential to inform the formulation of integrated policies that balance economic, social, and environmental goals.

It is recommended that future researches be expanded to include the following:

- comparative analysis of single-industry towns in other regions of Kazakhstan and beyond, with a view to identifying transferable strategies and practices;
- longitudinal studies on the impact of economic diversification efforts and infrastructure modernization initiatives.

Further researches addressing these areas will facilitate a more profound comprehension of the dynamics influencing the evolution of single-industry towns, thereby contributing to their successful transition into dynamic, multifunctional urban centers.

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