

Comparative Reality  
By: Stephen G. Wright  
For the Almaty Herald

Reader input:

“Firstly I would like to thank you for arising so highly-voltage questions in our days. I think that the majority of the current conflicts and war actions have been originated from misunderstanding between people. Sometimes we do not want to understand the way of life of each other not realizing that it is something pre-determined by history and culture. To my point of view that moment will come when a wall between the human beings is destroyed but here there is a question what a high price should be paid for letting this moment come!

I totally agree with you that one ought to respect the ethnic peculiarities of other people, though it is sometimes difficult, because they can be in conflict with your own. But entering a country with its culture, way of life, norms and canons every "enterer" should get to know about nation's integral attributes, just to have some background knowledge to avoid committing a gaffe. As for a community of foreign specialists, why did you separate it out as an individual group of the ethnic minority? Do you think that foreigners are experiencing some discrimination from the local content? What do you mean under "to establish, indeed, a good relationship between foreigners and local content"? Frankly speaking I thought that here (in Kazakhstan) there is a rather favorable climate in all respects for overseas people. Am I wrong?

But nevertheless it is a good idea to conduct a conference devoting to such issues or, at least, a round-table to put these questions at stake. Did you take some actions to make this venture be hosted? I think it will be very interesting!”

D. (Local Resident)

Hello D. –

To begin, as a group of people from other ethnic groups, we foreigners are an “ethnic minority” within the nation of Kazakhstan. So this being the case my position is to say that we need to be recognized as such and the relationship between us defined in that context. We live and work here. Our children go to school here. While most will not spend a lifetime here we still have a presence and an impact.

The Assembly of Peoples of Kazakhstan recently help a conference on the issue of ethnic minorities in Kazakhstan and it did make reference to the expatriate community in its draft working paper. I have not yet seen their final version, and I do hope that they still intend to include the expatriate community as part of their considerations and discussions.

While I have made some initial efforts to generate a conference on the issue of expatriate relation building, no one else has yet stepped up to help move the idea forward. Since you are keen on the idea yourself, I will most likely contact you for some assistance as things progress.

Over the last few months I have been invited by the American Chamber of Commerce to address their membership on this issue. We have held two short presentations and one round-table meeting to date. It is expected that I shall have further discussions with the membership in the near future. One of the driving forces behind this weekly column is to put the issue out in the open to a wider audience in the hope of generating substantive discussion and realistic answers.

Discrimination against foreigners is not unusual ANYWHERE! On a scale all nations have some degree of distrust of the outsider. A cursory review of recent news regarding immigration issues in the U.S., France, Germany or Great Britain indicate that there are “issues” between local residents and immigrants or expatriate communities. The recent initiatives by the United States to fingerprint, photograph and identify people entering the United States for security reasons is not without debate regarding discrimination and civil liberty.

What we are really looking at with this issue is more of a human response than a uniquely national one. Yes, there are incidences of discrimination, to varying degrees, found in Kazakhstan. One small example would be that a foreigner does not pay the same rent as you would pay. There is the misperception that firstly all foreigners can afford it (and there are some that in fact can) and second (as I have been told by some local residents) the higher rents are payback. As mentioned in my last article some people here seem to think we are stealing from you – so they exact payback!

The key question we all need to address is the degree to which there is a problem! The second step is to clearly identify ways to minimize potential negative nationalistic feelings, and to improve the working and living relationship for the purpose of mutual gain. Perhaps it is no better or no worse than anyone would find in Russia, or Sweden, or Italy, or France. We have created this column so that we can test our perceptions and dig a little deeper for the reality behind the perception.