

Master's Thesis

Building Kazakhstan's International Positive Image through 'Abai Centers' Abroad

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate the role of Abai Centers as an instrument of Kazakhstan's cultural diplomacy and soft power. As part of national foreign policy, Abai Centers were established to promote the Kazakh language, literature, and cultural heritage abroad, and to strengthen the country's international image. The significance of Abai Centers is often underscored in official narratives. Yet, no academic research has been dedicated to them.

Methodologically, the research is based on a qualitative analysis. The data was collected by combining multiple sources. The primary data was gathered through 20 semi-structured interviews with (1) representatives of the Kazakh diplomatic mission abroad, (2) experts and scholars in the field of cultural diplomacy and soft power, and (3) members of Kazakh diaspora and student associations overseas. As far as secondary sources are concerned, media records, institutional messages, and official materials were collected for analysis.

The results of the study show that there is a gap between the official description of Abai Centers and their actual activities. It was found that there is no clear and standardized institutional definition of what qualifies as an Abai Center. In practice, many centers operate in different formats. Their accessibility, level of coordination and financial support are significantly limited. The study also indicates that diaspora communities and student organizations play a no less important role in promoting Kazakh culture abroad. They often work actively through grassroots cultural initiatives.

The study makes recommendations regarding clarifying the institutional model of Abai Centers, improving coordination between centers, increasing the number of translated and digital resources, and developing partnerships outside of embassy-based spaces. It also emphasizes the importance of closer cooperation with diaspora and student associations and volunteer-based support to deal with staffing and sustainability issues.

Keywords: Cultural Diplomacy; Soft Power; Abai Centers; Kazakhstan; Diaspora Engagement

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This paper has been proofread using Grammarly software for punctuation, grammar, and general language accuracy. In addition, ChatGPT was used in a limited and supportive capacity to assist with idea generation, clarification of concepts, and improving the overall clarity and structure of the text. All analytical content, interpretations, and conclusions presented in this work are the original work of the authors.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	1
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	2
1. INTRODUCTION.....	4
2. LITERATURE REVIEW.....	7
2.1. Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy.....	7
2.2. Factors Influencing the Success of Cultural Centers.....	9
2.3. Cultural Diplomacy as a Soft Power Tool: Kazakhstan’s Strategy in the Global Arena	12
3. RESEARCH METHODS.....	15
3.1 Data.....	15
3.1.1 Primary Data: Interviews.....	15
3.1.2 Secondary Data.....	16
3.2 Analysis.....	16
3.3 Ethical Considerations.....	17
3.4 Limitations.....	17
4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS.....	19
4.1. Official Narratives and the Reality of Abai Centers.....	19
4.1.1 How Official Sources Describe Abai Centers.....	19
4.1.2. Uneven Presence, Symbolic Openings, and the 2020 Factor.....	22
4.2. How Abai Centers Operate in Practice.....	24
4.2.1. Operational Formats, Activities, and Audiences.....	24
4.2.2. Structural Constraints: Funding, Access, Materials, and Coordination.....	26
4.2.3. Credibility as a Condition of Success and the Risk of Becoming a “Propaganda Center”.....	28
4.2.4. Abai Centers as Digital Platforms.....	29
4.3. Diaspora and Student Associations in Cultural Promotion Abroad.....	33
4.3.1. Low Awareness of Abai Centers and the Practical Role of Diaspora Initiatives...	33
4.3.2. Cooperation with Embassies.....	35
5. CONCLUSION.....	36
6. RECOMMENDATIONS.....	39
REFERENCES.....	41
APPENDIX A.....	45
APPENDIX B.....	47

1. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary international relations, the projection of cultural identity and heritage has become a central mechanism through which states enhance their soft power and global influence (Nye, 2004). Institutions such as the British Council and the Goethe-Institut demonstrate how sustained cultural engagement (through language, arts, and education) can effectively translate cultural capital into long-term international presence (Lanshina, 2015, p.103). In this context, Kazakhstan has set up Abai Centers, named after the great Kazakh poet and philosopher Abai Kunanbaiuly, as essential components of its cultural diplomacy strategy. According to Seilkhanov (2024), these institutions seek to popularize Kazakh culture and language abroad, helping the country's worldwide image-building efforts.

The Abai Centers are cultural institutes that aim to promote Kazakhstan's history and engage overseas audiences via a range of activities. Their major duties are teaching the Kazakh language, organizing cultural events, staging literary and poetry recitals, and conducting seminars on arts and crafts (Taylor, 2020). They also work with local cultural organizations, colleges (such as Samarkand State University and George Washington University), and other institutions to organize events that promote cross-cultural understanding. The centers aim to present Kazakhstan as a culturally rich and contemporary nation by catering to a varied audience that includes locals, students, academics, and members of the Kazakh diaspora. Kazakhstan's formal efforts to participate in cultural diplomacy overseas began in 2020 with the establishment of the first Abai Center in Washington, D.C. (Satubaldina, 2023). According to a 2021 Silk Way TV report, the Abai Center initiative had expanded to 14 centers abroad at that time. Although this information is dated and may not reflect the current number of centers, it remains important for this study because it is one of the few publicly available sources that explicitly mentions Abai Centers and provides a specific count.

At the same time, although the formal state-branded Abai Centers program is generally traced to 2020, initiatives under the name “Abai” had emerged earlier in more informal and decentralized formats. As early as 2011, following high-level diplomatic engagement between Kazakhstan and Vietnam, an Abai Cultural and Scientific Center was opened at Hanoi National Pedagogical University at the initiative of Abai Kazakh National Pedagogical University (Akhmetov, 2021). A similar Kazakhstan–Vietnam cultural and educational center named after Abai was later established in Ho Chi Minh City in 2013. Additional Abai centers were opened in universities in China, Turkey, and Russia through inter-university cooperation

agreements, indicating that the idea preceded its institutionalization under a centralized framework (Akhmetov, 2021).

Although no scholarly studies were identified that examine Abai Centers specifically, the broader literature on Kazakhstan's cultural diplomacy and soft power provides an important context for understanding the structural challenges such initiatives may face. Existing research points to recurring problems in Kazakhstan's external image-building efforts, including limited funding, weak promotion, and the absence of systematic evaluation mechanisms (Taubayeva & Umirzakova, 2022). At the same time, established cultural institutions such as the British Council or the Goethe-Institut operate through clear organizational frameworks and relatively stable financial support, which are widely recognized as important conditions for effective cultural diplomacy (Cull, 2008, p. 38). By contrast, descriptive materials on Abai Centers tend to emphasize their symbolic significance, partnerships, and cultural activities rather than critically assessing how they function in practice (Taylor, 2020).

More specifically, the practical functioning of Abai Centers remains insufficiently understood. While broader studies on Kazakhstan's soft power and cultural diplomacy help identify the wider policy context, they do not examine Abai Centers as a distinct institutional initiative. As a result, several important questions remain open: what role these centers actually play in shaping Kazakhstan's international image, what communication strategies they use to engage audiences, how they are received in local contexts, and to what extent they are able to fulfill their stated objectives. Issues such as local cultural receptiveness, program quality, administrative limitations, and institutional sustainability have not yet been studied systematically.

This creates a clear gap between the symbolic importance of Abai Centers in official discourse and their practical functioning. **Thus, the importance of Abai Centers goes beyond cultural promotion alone.** It lies in Kazakhstan's broader effort to shape how it is perceived internationally, strengthen its dialogue, attract investment and partnerships, and support long-term development across political, economic, and cultural spheres. The present study addresses this gap by examining Abai Centers directly and evaluating their institutional reality, operational challenges, and cultural diplomacy potential.

Hence, this study addresses the following broad research question: **How do Abai Centers function to promote Kazakhstan's positive international image?** To examine this issue in greater depth, three sub-questions guide the analysis: **(1)** How do Abai Centers operate, and what are their core activities and target audiences? **(2)** What challenges do Abai Centers face in fulfilling their mission? **(3)** What measures can be taken to improve the functioning of Abai Centers as instruments of cultural diplomacy?

To answer these questions, this study adopts qualitative research based on semi-structured, in-depth interviews complemented by secondary data analysis. The findings suggest that Abai Centers operate through diverse and often loosely defined institutional formats, with their activities, audiences, and levels of engagement varying significantly across locations. At the same time, the study identifies a range of structural challenges, including limited funding, restricted accessibility, lack of coordination, and dependence on local initiative. In response to these issues, the analysis highlights several areas for improvement, particularly in terms of institutional standardization, expansion of public-facing platforms, and stronger integration of diaspora and student communities into cultural diplomacy efforts.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. The next section reviews the relevant literature on soft power, the factors contributing to the success of cultural centers, and Kazakhstan's existing cultural diplomacy initiatives. This is followed by a discussion of the research methodology. The subsequent section presents the findings of the study, and the final section outlines policy recommendations and concluding reflections.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews the key theoretical and empirical literature relevant to the study of Abai Centers within the broader context of cultural diplomacy and soft power. It is structured in three parts. First, it examines the concept of soft power and the role of cultural diplomacy in shaping international perceptions and state influence. Second, it discusses the main factors that determine the success of cultural centers, drawing on examples of established institutions and existing academic insights. Finally, it explores Kazakhstan's use of cultural diplomacy as a tool for building international legitimacy, situating the Abai Center initiative within the country's broader strategic efforts.

2.1. Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy

The concept of soft power is crucial for understanding how states use cultural diplomacy to shape global attitudes. Joseph Nye (2004) coined the term "soft power," defining it as the "ability to get others to want the outcomes that you want" through "attraction rather than coercion" (p. 5). It refers to a form of influence that relies on culture, political values, and foreign policy to enhance a country's impact on the international stage by prioritizing persuasion over force. Its instruments include cultural and public diplomacy, as well as international broadcasting, all of which contribute to promoting a favorable national image (Nye, 2008, p. 101). Through these mechanisms, states seek to enhance their attractiveness and strengthen their position in international relations. In this sense, the concept of soft power provides an important framework for understanding Kazakhstan's efforts to improve its global reputation through initiatives such as the Abai Centers.

Soft power manifests through a variety of channels, with cultural diplomacy being one of the most prominent. It involves the exchange of values, traditions, and cultural practices in order to strengthen relationships, gain influence, and shape national image (Cull, 2008, p. 40). Importantly, cultural diplomacy is not limited to state actors; it also includes the participation of cultural institutions, NGOs, and individuals (Cummings, 2003). Within this context, institutions such as the British Council, Confucius Institutes, and the Goethe-Institut are widely recognized as effective instruments of cultural diplomacy (Taylor, 1978, p. 251; Yellinek et al., 2020, p. 525). Through activities such as language promotion, exhibitions, academic exchanges, and cultural programming, these institutions contribute to long-term relationship-building and positive national image formation (Gienow-Hecht & Donfried,

2010). Cultural diplomacy can therefore be understood as a practical expression of soft power, with its effectiveness reflected in its ability to generate goodwill, engage foreign publics, and support diplomatic relations (Zamorano, 2016, p. 172).

Building on this, cultural centers represent one of the most visible and institutionalized forms of cultural diplomacy. They function as hubs for promoting national culture and values abroad. According to Szondi (2008, p. 13), such centers provide identifiable physical spaces where cultural programming intersects with public engagement, allowing countries to project their language, culture, and identity internationally. As a result, they play a significant role in fostering intercultural dialogue and strengthening international relationships.

In this broader context, Kazakhstan has adopted a similar approach by establishing cultural centers named after the prominent Kazakh poet Abai Kunanbaiuly. As noted by Zhou and Luk (2016, p. 636), the use of Abai's name carries not only cultural significance but also diplomatic meaning, reflecting broader foreign policy narratives. These centers, first formally established in 2020, aim to promote the Kazakh language, culture, and history while presenting Kazakhstan as a modern and culturally rich nation. Through activities such as language courses, poetry readings, exhibitions, and collaborative initiatives, Abai Centers seek to position Kazakhstan as an active participant in global cultural exchange (Taylor, 2020).

Kazakhstan's Abai Centers also reflect broader shifts in international relations, where influence is increasingly exercised through attraction rather than coercion. Their success, however, depends not only on the volume of cultural activities but also on how strategically these activities are designed and implemented. In this regard, the effectiveness of Abai Centers is closely linked to their ability to adapt to local contexts and engage diverse audiences.

Overall, soft power and cultural diplomacy remain central components of modern international relations, providing states with tools to influence global perceptions through attraction and mutual understanding. Cultural institutions, including Abai Centers, play an important role in this process by serving as platforms for cultural engagement and image-building. Against this theoretical background, this study examines the role of Abai Centers in shaping Kazakhstan's international image through the lens of soft power and cultural diplomacy.

2.2. Factors Influencing the Success of Cultural Centers

The academic literature frames cultural centers as important tools of soft power and cultural diplomacy. However, their effectiveness is not determined simply by their existence or symbolic role, but by a set of institutional, political, and operational factors that shape how they function in practice. Effective cultural centers, such as South Korea's Cultural Centers or China's Confucius Institutes, demonstrate the importance of aligning cultural messaging with local contexts and ensuring credibility in program delivery (Liu, 2019, p. 262; Elfving-Hwang, 2013, p. 17). In this sense, the literature suggests that the success of cultural centers depends not only on the cultural content they promote, but also on how that content is organized, financed, adapted, and perceived.

Writing on cultural diplomacy, several scholars have reached a broad consensus that, although it is an effective way of exercising soft power, its outcomes are contingent on a number of factors: the believability of cultural messages, cultural programming that aligns with the target context, and the congruity of such initiatives with other aspects of foreign policy (Szondi, 2008, p. 18). These factors are particularly important because they determine whether cultural institutions are seen as credible and relevant by foreign audiences, or whether they remain symbolic structures with limited practical influence. In this regard, the success of cultural centers depends on a combination of institutional stability, public legitimacy, adaptability, and long-term engagement.

One of the most important factors is stable funding combined with organizational continuity. The British Council, for instance, has evolved into one of the United Kingdom's principal instruments of international influence, in large part because of its long-term institutional support, global reach, and ability to sustain programming over time (Byrne, 2023, p. 495; Zhou, 2022, p. 615). Its effectiveness is not merely the result of the number of activities it organizes, but of the fact that it operates within a durable institutional framework and is able to support language promotion, cultural initiatives, and educational exchanges on a consistent basis. Similarly, the Goethe-Institut's success is closely connected to the relatively stable support it receives from the German Foreign Office, which enables it to maintain a broad international presence and conduct large-scale cultural programming across many countries (Lanshina, 2015, p. 87; Anheier et al., 2023, p. 35). Taken together, these examples suggest that cultural centers require not only symbolic legitimacy but also long-term financial and organizational stability in order to function effectively.

A second key factor is the balance between state support and institutional autonomy. Cultural centers often derive strength from being aligned with national foreign policy goals while at the same time maintaining sufficient independence to preserve their cultural credibility. In the case of the British Council, the literature emphasizes that the institution's success is linked to its relationship with the UK government, while also highlighting the importance of its public image as an organization with operational autonomy rather than as an overtly political actor (Cai, 2019, p. 52; Liu, 2019, p. 259). This balance appears crucial because it allows the institution to serve national interests without undermining its legitimacy as a cultural body. The same point can be extended more broadly: cultural centers are more likely to succeed when they are supported by the state but not perceived simply as instruments of political messaging.

Related to this is the issue of credibility, which emerges in the literature as one of the central conditions of cultural diplomacy. Cultural institutions are effective not only when they promote national culture, but when they do so in ways that are trusted by their audiences. Institutions such as the British Council have established this credibility through decades of consistent programming, especially in a context where power is gradually shifting from coercion to payment, and from payment to attraction (Anholt, 2011, p. 8; Cull, 2008, p. 44). By contrast, the experience of the Confucius Institutes demonstrates that credibility can also be undermined. Although Confucius Institutes achieved impressive global reach, with hundreds of institutes and classrooms opened internationally, their activities increasingly generated concern in some host countries because of perceived political influence, restrictions on academic freedom, and wider anxieties about propaganda and espionage (Hartig, 2011, p. 58; Zhou & Luk, 2016, p. 635; Starr, 2009, p. 73). As a result, institutions that initially appeared highly successful also became the subject of reputational contestation. This suggests that visibility and scale alone do not guarantee success; if cultural centers are not perceived as credible, their long-term effectiveness may be weakened.

A further factor influencing success is adaptation to local socio-political and cultural contexts. Cultural diplomacy does not take place in an institutional vacuum; it must respond to the environment in which it operates. The British Council's activities in postwar Turkey, for example, were effective in part because they were embedded in local platforms and adapted to domestic institutional realities through film screenings, cultural exhibitions, language courses, and seminars organized in cooperation with local cultural spaces (Malkoç,

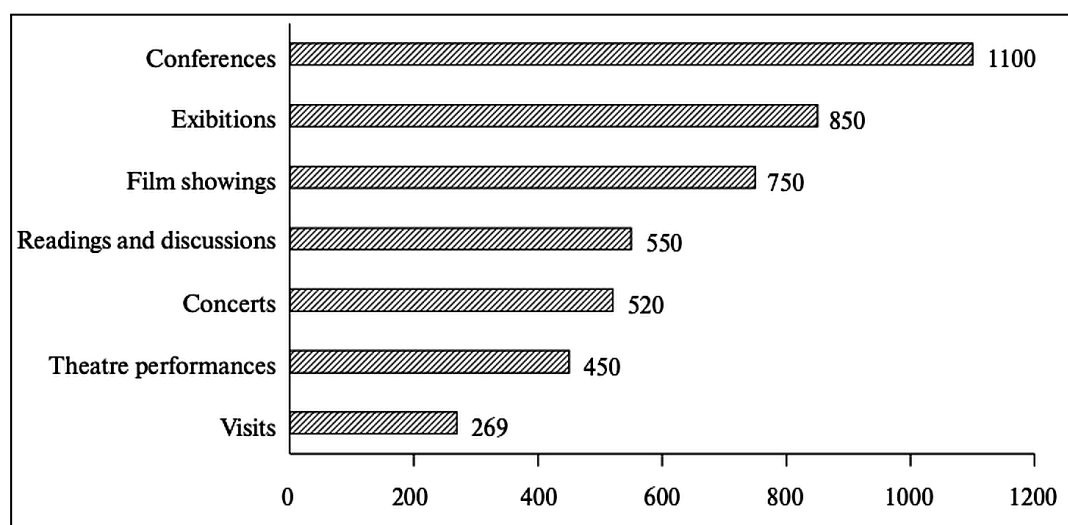
2018, p. 28). Likewise, the Goethe-Institut's role as a "cultural ambassador" has depended not only on promoting German language and culture, but also on sustaining intercultural dialogue through conferences, literature, music, theatre, and exhibitions that are intelligible and attractive to diverse audiences (Ngamsang & Walsh, 2013, p. 306). These examples suggest that cultural centers succeed when they move beyond one-directional cultural presentation and instead create forms of engagement that are relevant to local publics.

Another important factor is partnership-building and institutional embeddedness. Cultural centers tend to be more effective when they collaborate with local universities, museums, municipalities, or international organizations, since such partnerships expand their reach and increase their legitimacy. The literature on the British Council highlights its collaboration with international actors such as the World Bank, the United Nations, and the European Union, as well as its role in supporting higher education and scholarship initiatives (Zhou, 2022, p. 620). Similarly, the Goethe-Institut's strength lies not only in its programming but also in its ability to operate as part of broader networks of cultural and educational exchange. These cases indicate that successful cultural centers are rarely isolated spaces; rather, they are institutionally embedded and connected to wider ecosystems of cooperation.

At the same time, the literature also shows that scale and consistency of programming matter. The Goethe-Institut's nearly 20,000 annual events and millions of visitors illustrate how repeated and visible programming can build long-term cultural presence (Anheier et al., 2023, p. 35) **(as seen in Figure 1)**. Consistency allows cultural centers to become recognizable institutions rather than one-time initiatives. In this sense, successful cultural diplomacy is cumulative: it depends on repetition, continuity, and regular interaction with audiences over time.

Figure 1

Goethe Institute Cultural Events in 2012 (Lanshina, 2015, p.91)



Taken together, these studies suggest that the effectiveness of cultural centers depends on a set of interrelated conditions: stable funding, organizational continuity, credibility, local adaptation, institutional partnerships, and consistent programming. At the same time, the literature also demonstrates that these institutions can face serious limitations when they are perceived as overly politicized, lack public trust, or operate without sufficient institutional support. These insights are particularly relevant for emerging cultural initiatives such as Abai Centers. Unlike long-established institutions such as the British Council or the Goethe-Institut, newer entities must build visibility and credibility while often operating under more fragile institutional conditions. Therefore, the value of this literature for the present study lies not in providing direct parallels, but in identifying the factors that help explain why some cultural centers become effective instruments of soft power, while others remain fragmented, weakly institutionalized, or contested.

2.3. Cultural Diplomacy as a Soft Power Tool: Kazakhstan's Strategy in the Global Arena

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the declaration of independence, the formation of national identity became a central task for Kazakhstan as a newly independent state. During the Soviet period, national identity across the union was shaped by Marxist-Leninist ideology, but after the collapse of the USSR, these ideas lost much of their influence. This created an opportunity for Kazakhstan to redefine its national identity in ways that could strengthen its

legitimacy and international standing. However, this has not been an easy process. While some parts of society favor a national identity based on Islam and Turkic origins, others believe that ethnic Kazakh identity should be the defining basis of the country's image, rather than the inclusion of other nationalities living within it (Insebayeva & Insebayeva, 2022, p. 675). As Harrison (1995) argues, wherever there is competition for authority, prestige, or legitimacy, conflicts over identity tend to follow, shaping both nations and the leaders who seek long-term stability and credibility (p. 261). In this context, the search for national identity became closely linked to Kazakhstan's efforts to secure legitimacy abroad.

Guided by this broader objective, Kazakhstan has pursued a number of initiatives aimed at projecting its national identity externally and strengthening its cultural diplomacy. Over the course of its 33 years of independence, the country has organized a range of sports, cultural, educational, and entertainment events. One of the most prominent examples was EXPO-2017 in Astana, which, despite its high cost, brought together more than 3 million visitors from over 100 countries (Kosenov, 2014). Previous studies suggest that the exhibition reflected the long-term vision of Kazakhstan's leadership to raise international awareness of the country (Aben, 2017). Similarly, Kazakhstan sought legitimacy through membership in international organizations and through the creation of institutions such as the Kazakhstan International Development Agency (KazAID), the first such agency in Central Asia. Insebayeva (2020) argues that the key motivation behind this initiative was "external legitimization" and the aspiration to enhance Kazakhstan's soft power (p. 161). Through these efforts, Kazakhstan aimed to position itself not only as a recipient of international recognition but also as an active contributor to regional and global development. Against this broader background of image-building and external legitimization, the Abai Center initiative can be understood as a more explicitly cultural and symbolic instrument of Kazakhstan's diplomacy.

Kazakhstan's diverse culture, language, literature, and history form the basis of its cultural diplomacy. For example, the 175th anniversary of the birth of the legendary Kazakh poet and philosopher Abai Kunanbayuly in 2020 attracted the attention of the Kazakh government, which was looking for a symbol through which to strengthen cultural diplomacy, and gave rise to the idea of creating Abai Centers abroad (Satubaldina, 2023). As a result, multiple cultural centers were established in locations such as Washington, D.C., and other cities in Europe and Asia in order to strengthen Kazakhstan's national identity abroad and support the country's cultural diplomacy efforts (Jibek Joly TV, 2021).

These centers have used different approaches to promote culture through shared values and heritage, including exhibitions, language hours, and the celebration of Kazakh national and official holidays. At the same time, they have also incorporated information and communication technologies (ICT) into their activities as part of a more contemporary approach to cultural promotion. One of the important developments has been the use of websites and digital platforms as hubs for sharing daily activities, language resources, and announcements. In this sense, digital diplomacy enables people to participate remotely in cultural events and seminars, as well as to access contemporary resources such as images, podcasts, or videos in the Kazakh language with English subtitles (Telekanal 24.kz, 2020). As Aitolkyn Kourmanova, producer at the Washington Abai Center, noted in an interview with *The Astana Times* (2023), digital platforms have also served to challenge negative perceptions of Kazakhstan. In particular, stereotypes associated with Kazakhstan's post-Soviet image, as well as the influence of the satirical film *Borat*, have shaped distorted external views of the country (Satubaldina, 2023). In this regard, one of the main aims of Abai Centers is not only to promote Kazakh culture, but also to increase awareness of Kazakhstan and help counter persistent misconceptions through soft power.

The use of soft power in the case of Kazakhstan, and particularly through the initiative of the Abai Centers, remains an emerging yet insufficiently examined area of research. Although these centers are expected to contribute to Kazakhstan's cultural diplomacy and international image-building, there is still no systematic academic study that evaluates how they function in practice, what constraints they face, and whether they are capable of fulfilling their intended mission. Existing scholarship is largely focused on well-established global cultural institutes, while studies on Kazakhstan tend to address soft power and cultural diplomacy at a broader level rather than examining Abai Centers as a distinct institutional initiative. This makes the present study both necessary and timely. Its significance lies in moving beyond symbolic descriptions of the initiative and providing the first focused analysis of Abai Centers as practical instruments of cultural diplomacy. In doing so, it helps to assess whether these centers are genuinely contributing to Kazakhstan's international image or whether their potential remains limited by deeper institutional and operational constraints.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

With regards to methodological considerations, this study employs a qualitative research design. The rationale for choosing qualitative analysis is that this study seeks to understand how cultural initiatives like Abai Centers are used as instruments of cultural diplomacy and what role they play in shaping Kazakhstan's international image, while numerical indicators alone would not be sufficient to fulfill this objective. Considering that Abai Centers have not yet been studied academically, a qualitative approach offers an opportunity for an in-depth examination of their activities. In the following sub-sections, the chapter discusses the data collection process, analysis, ethical considerations, and limitations of the research in a detailed manner.

3.1 Data

3.1.1 Primary Data: Interviews

To address research questions, the study gathers primary and secondary data. Primary materials are drawn from 20 semi-structured interviews with 3 major participant groups. This categorization was done to provide flexibility for participants while keeping discussions in a common thematic framework. The first respondent group includes 8 representatives of Kazakhstani embassies overseas. In most cases, Abai Centers are affiliated with diplomatic missions, and activities there are frequently coordinated by embassy representatives. Their input offers valuable insights into programming practices, institutional structures, operational constraints, and budgeting of Abai Centers. Aside from embassy officials, 4 scholars and experts in soft power, cultural diplomacy, and Central Asian studies were also interviewed. This group was particularly significant to strengthen the theoretical foundation of the research. Their responses helped place empirical findings within broader discussions about cultural institutions, credibility, and international image. A final category of respondents comprises 8 leaders and members of Kazakhstani student associations abroad. Based on their input, the research gathers important data about how well this group is informed about Abai Centers, patterns of their collaboration, and Centers' practical role within the bigger diaspora community. Given that students are frequently engaged in cultural programs, they could shed light on how official institutions interact with grassroots cultural activities. Taken together, all respondents were interviewed in Kazakh, Russian, and English, based on their language preferences. All interviews were recorded with informed consent and manually transcribed to ensure accuracy. A complete interview guide can be found in Appendix A. In addition, names

of individuals, institutions, and countries have been removed or anonymized for confidentiality purposes.

3.1.2 Secondary Data

In addition to primary sources, the research also draws on secondary materials that include (1) official statements about Abai Center openings, (2) social media pages (Facebook, Instagram, YouTube), (3) embassy press releases, (4) media reports and television coverage, and (5) public event descriptions and institutional statements. These sources are important to identify the existing gaps between official narratives and the operational realities of Abai Centers. In several confirmed cases, it was found that centers listed in public accounts could not be verified through embassy communication or stakeholder interviews. Comparing interview evidence and documentary claims has, therefore, enriched the research analysis.

3.2 Analysis

This study relies on a thematic analysis. The analysis began with a careful revision of interview transcripts to get familiar with data. Instead of using predefined categories, open coding was done manually so that themes could emerge from the data itself. Over the course of this stage, recurring patterns were observed, including ambiguous definitions of ‘Abai Centers’, discrepancies between official accounts and practical operations, funding and resource limitations, restricted public access, the role of embassies in managing activities, limited multilingual materials, fragmentation between centers, diaspora role in replacing institutional functions, and concerns related to credibility. Following this stage, related codes were organized into broader analytical themes. A considerable attention was sustained to patterns that emerged across different participant groups. For instance, both embassy staff and experts mentioned financial constraints, demonstrating relevance of this topic in analysis. Finally, interview findings were compared with secondary data. Many inconsistencies were identified throughout the process. For instance, some Abai Centers from official accounts were reported as inactive or nonexistent by embassies. Instead of treating them as methodological errors, these discrepancies are an important asset of research findings.

The analytical approach is interpretive in nature and identifies patterns in data. Instead of using a predetermined evaluation framework, this study focuses on identifying structures, relationships, and contradictions that appear in data. This method is particularly relevant in

studies that abound with incomplete institutional information and unavailable formal performance indicators.

3.3 Ethical Considerations

This study was completed in accordance with ethical standards. Given the potentially sensitive nature of the research topic, the study primarily underwent ethical review by the Nazarbayev University Institutional Research Ethics Committee (IREC). Prior to interview sessions, participants were provided with an informed consent form. They got familiar with the research objectives, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw from answering any questions. Due to sensitivity of the topic and confidentiality concerns, all interviews were anonymized, and any identifiers were removed during transcription and analysis. In addition, all participants were reassured that information they provided would be used solely for research purposes.

3.4 Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, methodological constraints arose during the primary data collection. One of the challenging aspects was reaching embassies and obtaining their responses. Official letters for interview participation were sent in both Kazakh and English to representatives of diplomatic missions. In most cases, it took 2-4 weeks to receive their responses. A further issue is that the majority of ambassadors could not take part in interviews due to their limited availability. Unfortunately, some interview requests were postponed or denied altogether. Similar difficulties were observed when contacting cultural experts; however, they managed to reply and join interview calls in a timely manner. Compared to the previous 2 groups, Kazakhstani student associations demonstrated prompt communication. Almost all of them provided responses on the same day the interview invitations were sent. Another key limitation is related to the sensitive nature of the topic. Many interviewees were somewhat reluctant to participate because of the fear that their responses would provide politically or culturally sensitive information. This added an additional layer of complexity to the data collection process. To ensure their participation, researchers engaged in trust-building by providing informed consent documentation and persuading participants that the information would be strictly anonymized. As such, interviews were successfully conducted. Yet, these concerns had significant repercussions for the progress of data collection and the quality of responses.

Another important limitation that should be carefully considered is that this study intended to use a conceptual framework to address the research question. This framework was deliberately crafted to evaluate the operations of the Abai Centers. Specifically, it aimed at analyzing how various factors, such as funding, human resources, and institutional support, are used to organize cultural activities and how these activities produce tangible cultural outcomes in host countries. For operationalization purposes, however, this framework required consistent information regarding participation, staff, budget distribution, and institutional structure of the Abai Centers. Unfortunately, operationalization could not be accomplished because the data was either incomplete, unevenly documented, or inconsistent in nature. The lack of a clear definition of ‘the Abai Center’ adds an additional layer of complexity to comparative analysis. As a result, these limitations changed the research methodology. The logic model was therefore replaced by qualitative research.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This chapter offers empirical findings and their discussion to answer the key research question. The main inquiry guiding this study is how Abai Centers function to promote Kazakhstan's positive international image. This study boils down the research question into 3 sub-questions: (1) how Abai Centers operate, (2) what challenges do they face, and (3) what can be done to improve their functioning. Based on empirical data and secondary materials, this chapter suggests that Abai Centers contribute to advancing the positive image of Kazakhstan. Yet, their influence is inconsistent and differs across cases. In the official rhetoric, Abai Centers are presented as actively-operating and expanding cultural platforms. However, the evidence shows that the definition, structure, and operations of these centers differ significantly in practice. To shed light on these discrepancies, the remainder of this chapter is organized as follows.

4.1. Official Narratives and the Reality of Abai Centers

‘What qualifies as the Abai Center?’ is one of the main questions that this section aims to address. It points to the fact that Abai Centers have long suffered from definitional ambiguity: there is still no uniform definition that explains the nature, activities and structure of these centers. Abai Centers are presented differently in official records and in practice, and both primary and secondary data confirm this pattern.

4.1.1 How Official Sources Describe Abai Centers

According to official sources, Abai Centers represent an expanding infrastructure of cultural diplomacy aimed at promoting Kazakh culture and language to foreigners. These materials also feature public events, such as opening ceremonies, book exhibitions, cultural performances, and official meetings that engage government echelons, diplomats, and experts in academia. In this way, Abai Centers are depicted as visible platforms that foster cultural dialogue and educational exchange.

At the same time, a careful examination of secondary sources brings to light significant inconsistencies. Different reports provide different statistics regarding the number of centers overseas. Some of them provide smaller numbers, while others refer to broader lists (**see Figure 2**).

Excerpt from the Database of Abai Cultural-Information Centers Abroad¹

Note. Excerpt from the official database of “Abai Cultural-Information Centers Abroad,” which lists 38 centers reportedly established between 2016 and 2021. **Figure 2** illustrates examples of centers located in libraries, embassies, and cultural institutions. Source: Kishkenbayeva (n.d.).

¹ The excerpt shows Abai Cultural-Information Centers located in Azerbaijan, the Czech Republic, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Italy, and Belarus, with opening dates recorded between 2019 and 2021. 33. Azerbaijan (Baku, M. Akhundov National Library) (2019); 34. Czech Republic (Prague, Klementinum National Library) (2020); 35. United Arab Emirates (Embassy of Kazakhstan) (2020); 36. Egypt (Embassy of Kazakhstan) (2020); 37. Italy (2020); 38. Belarus (Minsk, National Library of Belarus) (2021).

However, the number of Abai Centers is not the only problem. The evidence shows that research confusion surrounding Abai Centers also stems from two questions: whether these centers actually exist, and, most importantly, what is meant by the Abai Center. According to Kishkenbayeva (n.d.), there is no single consolidated official registry clearly distinguishing between cultural-information centers, embassy-based centers, university initiatives, and later institutionalized Abai Centers, such as the one opened at George Washington University in 2020. Therefore, there is not only statistical, but also a conceptual ambiguity surrounding this initiative.

This issue is especially visible in empirical evidence. Interview findings suggest that Abai Center does not refer to a single clear institutional format. One of the respondents described the Abai Center as the embassy room designated for official meetings, with Abai's portrait, quotes, and books visible to guests (Diplomatic mission representative 5, October 28, 2025). Another respondent reported that the Abai Center is a university-based office with books displayed to all visitors (Diplomatic mission representative 7, November 17, 2025). In remaining cases, interviewees also suggested that the center might be formally opened in a room with books, academic materials, and posters displayed. However, such rooms do not usually serve cultural purposes. Secondary materials also support these findings. They list different labels, such as 'Abai Centers', 'Abai information-cultural centers', embassy-based offices, university-based spaces, cultural and business houses, and online platforms (Kazinform, 2021). Additional evidence supports this diversity of formats, showing that Abai-related initiatives also include scientific and educational centers, such as the recently opened center at Kazan Federal University, as well as various cultural, literary, and communicative spaces aimed at promoting the Kazakh language and culture (Tilmedia.kz, n.d.). This suggests that the label "Abai Center" functions as an umbrella term applied to multiple cultural formats rather than to one standardized institution.

Taken together, these findings indicate that a fundamental issue is not only that official reports may exaggerate the number of actively-operating Abai Centers, but also that different cultural formats are put under the same 'Abai Center' label. All aforementioned institutions are different in terms of their accessibility, activities, and objectives and putting them under the same label distorts official statistics regarding the number of real Abai Centers that operate in the same institutional sense.

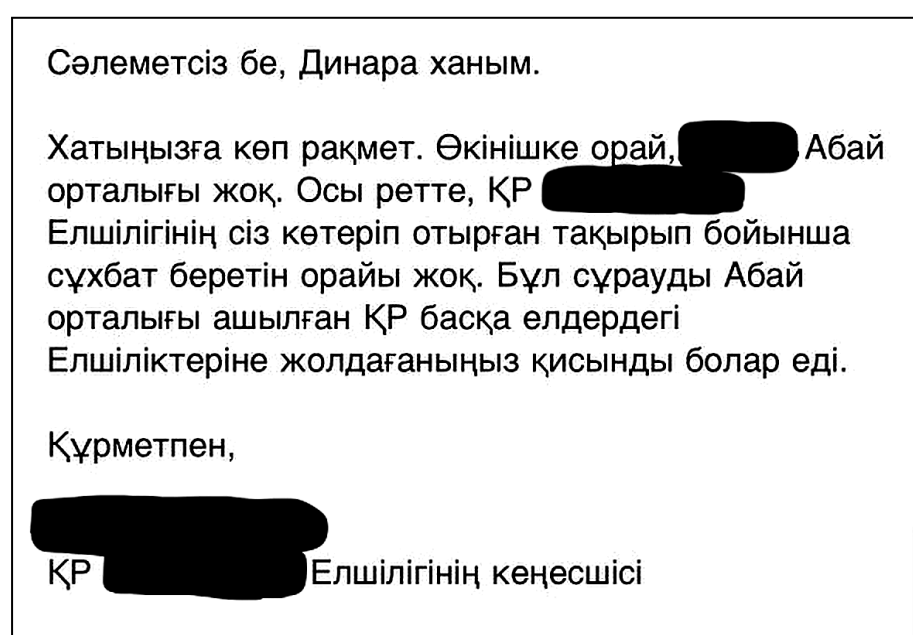
4.1.2. Uneven Presence, Symbolic Openings, and the 2020 Factor

Embassy interviews suggest that the centers' presence on paper does not always imply the real existence of centers. Some embassy responses indicated that no Abai Centers were established in their designated countries (as seen in Figure 3):

“No, there is currently no Abai Center in our Embassy” (Diplomatic mission representative 1, June 12, 2025).

Figure 3

Anonymized Embassy Response Confirming Absence of an Abai Center²



Another participant explained:

“No Abai Center is currently working; it may have existed some years ago. But now there is no Abai Center, and I have not encountered any documents related to an Abai Center” (Diplomatic mission representative 6, November 3, 2025).

A further response similarly confirmed the absence of an operating center:

“I do not know exactly when it was closed. But at present, the Abai House is not functioning in this country. In any case, that center has not been preserved to the

² Hi, Dinara, Thank you very much for your letter. Unfortunately, there is no Abai Center here. In this regard, the Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan does not have the opportunity to give an interview on the topic you raised. It would be more appropriate to direct this request to the embassies of Kazakhstan in other countries where Abai Centers have been established. Sincerely, Advisor of the Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan

present day, and I have not heard of it” (Diplomatic mission representative 3, October 7, 2025).

A representative of another embassy reported that a cultural office known as ‘Abai House’ was once established, but later closed (Expert 4, October 22, 2025). These responses are of particular significance, because they are provided by individuals who engage closely with cultural programs on an institutional level. These actors acknowledge that secondary sources may refer to these places as active. Yet, in reality they may have terminated operations, never become fully operational, or existed only symbolically. These responses, obtained through both email communication and direct interviews with embassy representatives, reveal a clear gap between media announcements and institutional reality.

The findings also report cases where the establishment of Abai Centers was planned or proposed but never implemented in practice. Participants mentioned that official requests from Ministries were made to launch centers in some countries; however these discussions remained on paper. One embassy member mentioned:

“We got the request to open the Abai Center in the capital of country X from the Ministry...Unfortunately, we never started the project” (Diplomatic mission representative 4, October 13, 2025).

Taken together, these findings help explain the following: while cultural initiatives like the Abai Center may appear extensive in official statements, they are fragmented and uneven in reality.

Timing is another important factor that contributes to the gap between official narratives and institutional realities. Secondary materials highlight the importance of 2020 as this year marked Abai’s 175th anniversary. On that occasion, Kazakhstan has launched a series of projects to advance its cultural diplomacy overseas, including Abai Centers. However, these initiatives coincided with COVID-19 period. The pandemic has caused profound disruptions in operations of the centers, affecting travelling, public meetings, and cultural programs. Consequently, much of the centers were opened symbolically, and they lacked conditions necessary for a long-term sustenance and operation. One participant reported this concern directly:

“After the pandemic, we understood that if we only opened one office and then wrote a press release, it would stop working afterwards” (Diplomatic mission representative 6, November 3, 2025).

This statement is of special importance, because it reinforces the idea that ceremonial visibility does not always reflect institutional success of such centers. Indeed, official statements, media coverage, ribbon-cutting, and anniversary celebration events create a perception that Abai Centers are actively-functioning entities. In reality, these ceremonial practices do not guarantee that Abai centers would remain active afterwards. According to some responses, this issue is particularly evident in Kazakh embassies in Europe, where Abai Centers announced in 2020 later terminated their operations or were confirmed as inactive.

4.2. How Abai Centers Operate in Practice

The previous research section confirms that the existing Abai Centers do not align with a single institutional model and they lack a common definition. It is further significant to understand how these spaces operate in practice. Therefore, this section draws attention to the programs, activities, and audiences of these centers, as well as factors that impact their performance and success. Findings suggest that Abai Centers face significant challenges in terms of funding, accessibility, resources, and credibility as a stable cultural platform.

4.2.1. Operational Formats, Activities, and Audiences

According to interviews, Abai Centers exist in different institutional formats, mainly as the embassy-based center. It is a common operational format that describes centers located in halls, meeting rooms, or big offices as a part of a broader diplomatic mission (**see Figure 4**). One participant explained that such places often serve as the main room for government and international meetings. They usually have Abai’s image, his sayings, and books displayed for guests. Another interviewee referred to an Abai Hall (Diplomatic mission representative 5, October 28, 2025). This is an embassy-based space which was launched during an anniversary celebration. It is used for official gatherings and also displays prominent works of Abai as part of a broader cultural heritage. A key advantage of such a model is that it successfully integrates cultural symbolism into day-to-day diplomatic practice. Visitors who frequent the hall gain knowledge about Abai as a prominent Kazakh figure via tangible

sources (portrait, books). This significantly shapes the perception of Kazakhstan as a country with a rich intellectual legacy.

Figure 4

Photo of Abai Hall / Embassy-Room Interior



Note. Photographs of an Abai Hall located inside a Kazakh embassy abroad. The images demonstrate the embassy-room format of some Abai Centers, featuring cultural displays such as a portrait of Abai Kunanbaiuly, Kazakh-language books, and national symbols. The photographs were shared by an embassy representative to illustrate the physical arrangement of the space.

Other Abai Centers exist as library offices at universities of host countries (Tilmedia.kz, n.d.). Their programs usually include exhibitions, lectures, poetry readings or commemorative events for Abai. Based on these activities, it can be inferred that Abai Centers seek to engage different groups of audiences at once. According to the official narrative, these groups include residents of host countries, members of Kazakh diaspora, and all those who are interested in Kazakhstan and its culture. However, empirical evidence suggests that the

audience depends on the institutional format of the center. Embassy-based ‘Abai Centers’, for instance, are designed for official events that engage individuals from politics. As a result, the general public remains as a group of secondary importance. University-based spaces, on the other hand, have more potential for public engagement, but it depends on the longevity of partnerships and capacity of places.

4.2.2. Structural Constraints: Funding, Access, Materials, and Coordination

Interview findings report that funding has the largest influence on the ability of cultural centers to exist as a stable platform. Limited and unstable funding not only prevents stakeholders from launching the center in a separate public space but also leads to staffing shortages. As a result, most centers are located in embassies or partner institutions, where the additional responsibility for organizing events and maintaining activities falls largely on embassy staff, despite the fact that their primary duties lie elsewhere. The case of the Kazakh Embassy in country Y, often regarded as one of the active Abai Centers, illustrates this point. According to the interview, the embassy requested support from the Bolashak scholarship program to secure a staff member with relevant cultural experience from among its scholarship recipients. This additional human resource reportedly played an important role in enhancing the center’s activities. As expert 4, a cultural diplomacy specialist interviewed on October 22, 2025, explained:

We asked the Bolashak program for help because, above all, we needed human resources. I myself am engaged in diplomatic work and am responsible for political issues, theses, and analytical reports. It was difficult to run the Abai Center only as a hobby. Therefore, the Bolashak program supported us and sent a qualified specialist for one year. (Expert 4)

Therefore, Abai Centers cannot afford themselves hiring personnel, purchasing necessary equipment, and planning long-term programs and events. This observation appears across several cases and participant groups. One respondent summarized the problem with unusual clarity:

“The main issue is that any initiative, project, or center requires funding ” (Expert 2, November 12, 2025).

Another respondent firmly stated that Abai Centers do not have a designated budget program from the government. Many organizers have had to seek external support from companies such as Chevron and ExxonMobil to organize cultural programs (Expert 4, October 22, 2025). However, such support has been limited, inconsistent, or insufficient to sustain all Abai Centers over time. Hence, the absence of a separate funding explains why many initiatives eventually cease to exist.

Public accessibility is another important issue. The matter is that the majority of existing Abai Centers are located in embassies or universities, and these places have limited public access due to security restrictions. As a result, Abai centers cannot engage wider audiences on a regular basis and operate as open cultural platforms. Several interviewees pointed to the limitations of an embassy-room model. They noted that, because the center is based in the embassy, it is not truly public. As one respondent observed:

“Not every person can come here. It is not easy. Mainly, official meetings, conferences, press briefings, and diplomatic meetings with representatives of delegations are held here” (Diplomatic mission representative 5, October 28, 2025).

Limited public participation implies that the center can be used for official representation purposes, but not as an accessible cultural place.

Another common challenge is related to a limited availability of materials for foreigners. One participant explained that the problem was not only the absence of a visible formal center, but also the lack of visible and accessible cultural resources:

If someone asked me where the Abai Center was, I did not even have a place to show them. That is why I asked embassy staff to give me gifts or souvenirs that remained in archives or storage. One person gave national clothing, another gave Kazakh books, and others contributed the emblem of Kazakhstan, an eagle monument, and similar items. In this way, I collected useful materials and opened a small Abai corner.
(Expert 2, November 12, 2025)

Respondents also consistently reported that cultural materials in Kazakh and Russian alone are not sufficient to attract foreign visitors. One participant from an embassy noted that more books are needed in English (Diplomatic mission representative 8, February 9, 2026). Cultural experts also raised these concerns, suggesting that access to translated Kazakh

literature could serve as an effective low-cost strategy for engaging more people. Overall, this problem is of particular significance because it sheds light on the difference between symbolic representation and real engagement. Indeed, materials in Kazakh and Russian can serve as additional cultural assets, but they cannot guarantee that foreign visitors will gain more insights about Kazakhstan. What can truly contribute are translated books, podcasts, educational resources, and explanatory content.

Finally, we identified fragmentation across Abai Centers. Secondary sources confirm that these places usually suffer from (1) institutional fragmentation, and (2) the absence of a unified coordination between centers. Empirical evidence supports this observation. The prevailing majority of participants stated that Abai Centers do not have a unified global network with common programming, standards, and coordinated exchanges of resources. They usually rely on local initiatives or operate separately. One embassy-based interviewee stated directly:

“We don’t really have collaborations because there is a lot of work in every embassy, and also there are only one or two people working there. That’s why it would be difficult” (Expert 2, November 12, 2025).

The absence of coordination creates additional challenges. First, centers struggle to share translated materials, event concepts, and digital content. Second, each place develops its own approach to programming instead of following a shared framework. Third, when common standards are not available, the aforementioned definitional ambiguity becomes more pronounced. When each center decides on its own what truly qualifies as an “Abai Center,” the concept becomes less clear.

4.2.3. Credibility as a Condition of Success and the Risk of Becoming a “Propaganda Center”

This is one of the most interesting findings made through interviews with experts. They stated that the issue is not only whether the center has sufficient resources, but also how it is perceived in host countries. One of the experts cautioned that Abai Centers can be easily viewed as a propaganda instrument if they simply reproduce a carefully orchestrated and overly positive image of Kazakhstan or invite official representatives only. Limited public participation may raise additional concern about openness and trustworthiness of Abai Centers. The warning was explicit:

“Otherwise, it’s going to be viewed as a kind of propaganda center” (Expert 1, November 1, 2025).

This point is important because it recognizes credibility as a key component of success. Creating the impression that the Abai Center is an open space with intellectual diversity and cultural confidence can help it gain trust from local residents despite limited resources. In contrast, a center that appears scripted or purely promotional is less likely to be trusted, particularly in an academic or civic setting. Therefore, findings indicate that effective cultural diplomacy does not only require high quality events, but also openness, participation of diverse guests and speakers, and sensitivity for the expectations of the local public.

4.2.4. Abai Centers as Digital Platforms

Digital platforms appear to have played a crucial role in the functioning, continuity, and public visibility of the Abai Center, especially in a context where maintaining a permanent and publicly accessible physical center was difficult. According to interviews, the Kazakh embassy in country Y deliberately abandoned the logic of symbolic opening ceremonies and instead focused on digital accessibility, recurring online presence, and content circulation. One expert clearly explained the limitations of a purely ceremonial approach:

“We realized that if we simply opened one room, cut the ribbon, wrote a nice press release, and announced that the Abai Center had opened in country Y, it would stop functioning afterward” (Expert 2, November 12, 2025).

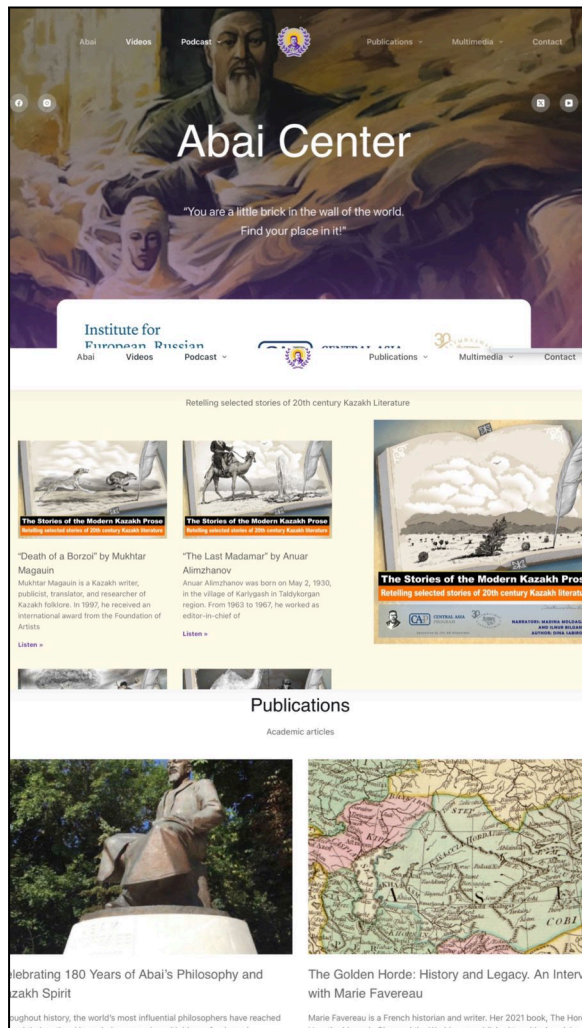
The expert explained that the center was created in a virtual format because contemporary audiences prefer to consume information online rather than through established cultural spaces. He also noted that the center did not operate as a daily walk-in facility, but rather relied on outreach efforts based on periodic programs, digital announcements, and events, with events typically held once or twice a month, depending on available resources. A second interview corroborates this interpretation. According to another cultural diplomacy specialist, the pandemic, staff turnover, and institutional uncertainty forced the organizers to rebuild the concept from scratch. As a result, they adopted digital and hybrid forms of cultural production, including online symposia, recorded interviews, exhibitions, podcasts, literary audio projects, and online academic events (Expert 4, October 22, 2025). A total of 11 podcasts were produced to explain Kazakh music, literature, and cultural symbolism in an accessible format for foreign audiences. The interviews also show that these digital efforts

have achieved measurable visibility. For example, a music-focused podcast ranked 67th in the music category on Google Podcasts, later entered Apple's top 100 podcasts, ranked first in Costa Rica, and entered the top 100 podcasts in the US (Expert 2, November 12, 2025; Expert 4, October 22, 2025). The digital record strongly supports these interview-based observations and suggests that the center's online presence has been not merely symbolic, but also extensive. The Abai Center's website presents itself as an institutional platform dedicated to supporting Kazakh culture and cultural studies, as well as to raising awareness and interest in Kazakh culture in country Z through regular events, media coverage, and support for cultural studies (Abai Center, n.d.). The website also shows that the center's digital work goes far beyond simple announcements. It includes academic articles, books, podcasts, multimedia materials, interviews with international scholars, a virtual "Abai House Museum" experience, a section on Western travelers' writings about Kazakhstan and Central Asia, and an archive of events. They represent an effort to create a long-term digital repository rather than a temporary project page (Abai Center, n.d.). It is particularly important that the content is not limited to Abai. In addition to materials on Abai's philosophy, the website contains articles and interviews on the Golden Horde, felt culture, the Aral Sea, Abilkhan Kasteyev, contemporary Kazakh art, language policy, oral poetry, and the history of Kazakh literature, which in turn confirms the view that the center is conceived as a broader Kazakh cultural platform rather than a narrow space of remembrance (Abai Center, n.d.).

The social media pages further confirm this view. The official Instagram page of Abai Center presents the center as a public cultural platform associated with the broader [Abaicenter.org](https://abaicenter.org) initiative (see **Figure 5**), and the official YouTube channel of the Kazakh Cultural "Abai Center" at the Elliott School of International Affairs at George Washington University (see **Figure 6**) provides further evidence of a sustained online presence through posted videos and archived materials (Abai Center Instagram, n.d.; Abaicenter YouTube, n.d.).

Figure 5

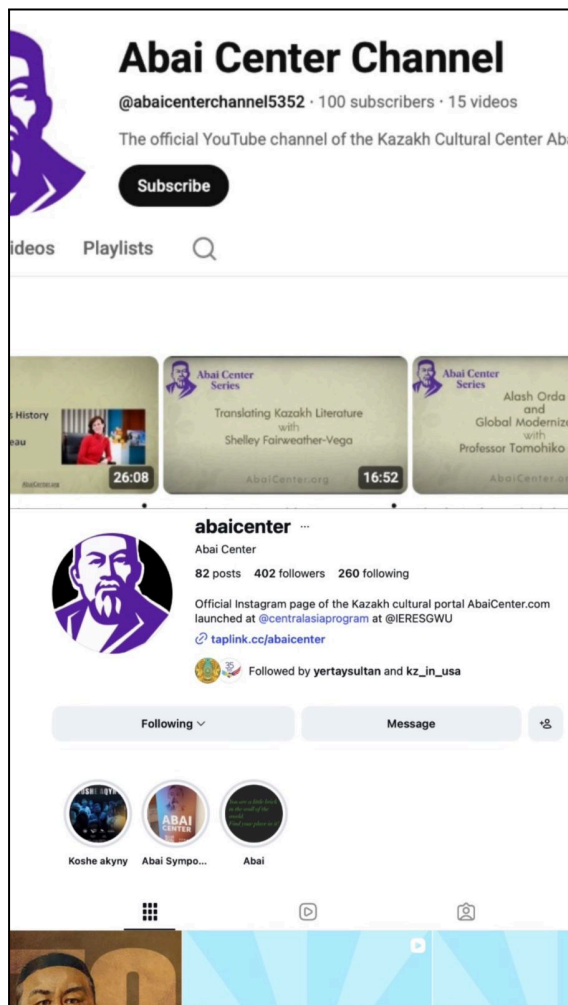
Homepage of the Abai Center website



Note. Screenshot of the official Abai Center website showing its sections on publications, podcasts, multimedia, interviews, events, and cultural materials. **Figure 5** illustrates the breadth of the center's digital content and its presentation as a broader platform for Kazakh culture and cultural studies. Source: Abai Center (n.d.).

Figure 6

Instagram and Youtube homepages of Abai Center.



Note. Screenshots taken from Abai Center’s official Instagram and YouTube pages. Source: Abai Center (n.d.).

Instagram content suggests that the page is used to promote and preserve a wide range of events, including academic, cultural, literary, cinematic, and educational programs. For example, one post reported that more than 80 people attended an online international scientific conference celebrating the legacy of Mukhtar Auezov, while other posts showcase Kazakh traditions such *tussaukeser*, *bata*, and *asyq*, as well as national dishes such as *nauryz kozhe* and *boursak*.

4.3. Diaspora and Student Associations in Cultural Promotion Abroad

The previous section examined the functioning of Abai Centers and operational constraints that limit their success. Building on this, the following section aims to focus on Kazakhstani student associations and diaspora overseas. Responses from these individuals offer practical insights into their interactions with Abai Centers, their awareness of such programs, and their role in disseminating Kazakh culture in foreign contexts. This group of participants is especially significant for our study, because their contribution to cultural initiatives is immense: they actively participate in cultural programs and support them. Sometimes, they even do what formal institutions are expected to do.

4.3.1. Low Awareness of Abai Centers and the Practical Role of Diaspora Initiatives

One of the striking research findings is that representatives of diaspora and student associations are not well informed about Abai Centers. Some members, who take active roles in cultural programs, reported that they were unfamiliar with these centers before the interview. This observation is of special importance because grassroots actors represent precisely the kind of group that is expected to be aware of or work with such cultural projects. Their knowledge of Abai Centers is significantly limited, and this shows that such cultural initiatives remain relatively unknown among Kazakhs abroad. A member of student association responded:

“Unfortunately, I did not hear anything about Abai Center. This is my first time hearing it” (Student association representative 1, November 17, 2025).

This quote indicates that even within active networks of Kazakhani students, the concept of the Abai Center is not necessarily a familiar institutional reference point.

Nonetheless, a limited familiarity with Abai Centers does not imply that there are no cultural diplomacy efforts at all. Empirical evidence proves that Kazakhs abroad make significant contributions to organizing cultural activities and representing our country in the social and academic life of host communities. These events include Nauryz festivals, concerts, movie screenings, sports events, traditional food gatherings, and community-based cultural shows. Student and diaspora organizations frequently described their primary mission as community building, helping newcomers, and coordinating their activities. Some respondents said that such associations were formed because there were no similar official platforms before.

One participant explained this in the following way:

“Because of their absence, we had the idea to open the association ourselves” (Student association representative 3, November 18, 2025).

Another participant emphasized the informal strength of student-initiated efforts:

“Students are more down-to-earth... people are not afraid to approach us” (Student association representative 4, November 18, 2025).

These responses demonstrate that student associations are not just social clubs. They often function as responsive and low-cost intermediaries of culture between foreign audiences and Kazakhstan.

Figure 7

Diaspora/Student Cultural Event (Nauryz Celebration)



Note. Photographs depicting cultural events organized by a Kazakhstani student association abroad, including traditional music performances, national dance, and community gatherings. The images illustrate how diaspora and student communities contribute to promoting Kazakh

culture outside the country. Source: Official Instagram page of the Italian Kazakh student association *Kaz Society*.

Another important finding is that diaspora members make a repetitive focus on informal and experience-based cultural formats, particularly food and music. They say that such forms of cultural representation are effective in engaging foreigners. One participant said:

“The strongest effect comes from formats that allow people to actually feel the culture, Kazakh cuisine and music” (Student association representative 5, November 19, 2025).

Another participant referred to traditional dishes and dombra performances as always being successful (Student association representative 7, November 21, 2025). In contrast to brochures or static displays, such formats are pragmatic, sensory, and highly accessible in nature, and they can help foreigners become familiar with Kazakh culture through real-life experiences. These observations also show that the most effective cultural promotion practices are not necessarily those articulated by official institutions. Student groups and diaspora may be better informed about what attracts attention most in everyday intercultural situations.

4.3.2. Cooperation with Embassies

Findings also show that interactions between diaspora communities and state entities tend to be ad hoc rather than systematic. To organize large-scale events, embassies usually provide halls, in-kind assistance with food, equipment, or venue arrangements. However, they never offer direct financial support. In most cases, cooperation occurred on an event-to-event basis. This finding is important as it shows the current limits, as well as the potential of state–diaspora cooperation. On one hand, embassies can provide visibility and resources to support such events. The constraint, however, lies in the absence of systematized partnership channels, clearly defined support mechanisms, and regular planning.

5. CONCLUSION

This study examined how Abai Centers function to promote Kazakhstan's positive international image and whether they can operate as meaningful instruments of cultural diplomacy and soft power. In doing so, it addressed an important gap in the literature. While Kazakhstan's soft power and cultural diplomacy have been discussed in broader terms, Abai Centers themselves had not previously been examined as a distinct institutional initiative. This thesis therefore contributes by moving beyond official descriptions and focusing on how these centers function in practice.

The literature review showed that soft power works through attraction rather than coercion, and that cultural diplomacy is one of its most visible expressions. It also demonstrated that cultural centers do not become effective simply because they exist. Their success depends on several conditions, including stable funding, organizational continuity, credibility, adaptation to local contexts, institutional partnerships, and consistent programming. These insights are particularly important for understanding Abai Centers, which were established as part of Kazakhstan's broader effort to strengthen its international presence and cultural visibility.

The findings show that Abai Centers do contribute to Kazakhstan's cultural presence abroad, but in a way that is uneven, fragmented, and highly dependent on local conditions. First, Abai Centers do not operate according to a single institutional model. In practice, they appear in different forms, including embassy-based halls, university offices, cultural-information spaces, and digital platforms. Their activities also vary significantly, which means that the term "Abai Center" is used broadly and inconsistently. As a result, the initiative remains conceptually unclear and difficult to assess in a uniform way.

Second, the study identified a clear gap between official narratives and practical reality. Public sources often describe Abai Centers as an active and expanding international network, yet the evidence collected in this study shows a far more uneven picture. Some centers are active, some exist only in symbolic or limited form, and some announced centers are difficult to verify in practice. One of the study's central conclusions is therefore that symbolic visibility does not necessarily mean institutional consolidation.

Third, the study found that the main challenges facing Abai Centers are structural rather than symbolic. The most significant of these are limited funding, the absence of dedicated staff, weak coordination, restricted accessibility, and the lack of a common institutional model. In

many cases, the work of the center depends on embassy staff whose primary responsibilities lie elsewhere. This makes the functioning of the center dependent on local initiative rather than on a stable organizational system. These findings support the broader literature, which shows that cultural institutions require continuity, credibility, and institutional support if they are to function effectively.

An especially important insight of the study is that cultural diplomacy in practice is often carried out not only by formal institutions, but also by diaspora communities and Kazakhstani student associations abroad. In many cases, these groups organize cultural events, create visibility through social media, and introduce Kazakhstan to foreign audiences through direct cultural interaction. Where Abai Centers are absent, inaccessible, or weakly institutionalized, diaspora networks often fill the gap. This finding broadens the understanding of cultural diplomacy by showing that Kazakhstan's image abroad is shaped not only by official structures, but also by grassroots cultural activity.

Taken together, these findings point to a broader conclusion. The problem of Abai Centers is not simply institutional or cultural in a narrow sense. It is also about how Kazakhstan presents itself to the world and how effectively it transforms cultural symbolism into lasting international presence. In this respect, Abai Centers matter not only because they promote Kazakh language, literature, and heritage, but because they are part of Kazakhstan's wider effort to strengthen its international image, increase global visibility, build trust and recognition, and create reputational foundations for investment, partnerships, and development across different spheres.

From this perspective, the central issue is not only whether Abai Centers exist, but whether they function in a way that is credible, accessible, and institutionally sustainable. A center that exists mainly in official discourse or ceremonial visibility cannot fully perform the role expected from an instrument of cultural diplomacy. What matters is whether it has the continuity, resources, public reach, and strategic clarity necessary to shape how Kazakhstan is understood abroad in a meaningful and lasting way.

Thus, the significance of this study lies in showing that cultural diplomacy should be assessed not through symbolic openings alone, but through institutional reality. By focusing directly on Abai Centers, this thesis demonstrates that the initiative holds considerable potential, yet its broader value will depend on whether Kazakhstan is able to develop it into a coherent,

outward-facing, and credible platform of engagement. Ultimately, the issue of Abai Centers is not only about culture; it is about whether Kazakhstan can convert cultural heritage into credible international presence, stronger partnerships, and long-term global recognition.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be proposed to strengthen the institutional effectiveness and practical sustainability of Abai Centers. These recommendations follow directly from the key issues identified in the research, particularly conceptual ambiguity, limited accessibility, weak coordination, insufficient human resources, and the uneven ability of centers to engage foreign audiences.

Clarify and standardize the institutional model of Abai Centers. A clear institutional definition of what constitutes an Abai Center should be developed. At present, the term is used for a wide range of formats, including embassy halls, university rooms, cultural corners, and digital initiatives. This lack of clarity weakens the coherence of the initiative and makes evaluation difficult. A more standardized model, based on core institutional features and minimum programming expectations, would make the initiative more consistent and recognizable while still allowing adaptation to local conditions.

Expand the initiative beyond embassy-based spaces. Where possible, Abai Centers should be developed through partnerships with universities, libraries, museums, and cultural organizations rather than relying primarily on diplomatic premises. Although embassy-based spaces are useful for official representation, they are often limited in public accessibility. More open and publicly accessible venues would improve engagement with students, researchers, and local communities, while also making the centers more suitable for regular educational and cultural programming.

Strengthen translated and digital cultural resources. The study shows that many centers lack accessible materials for non-Kazakh-speaking audiences, especially in English or the host-country language. Greater investment should therefore be directed toward translated books, short educational publications, podcasts, videos, and online lectures. Digital content is particularly important in cases where physical centers are small, irregularly active, or difficult to access. Expanding such resources would help Abai Centers reach broader audiences at relatively low cost.

Institutionalize cooperation with diaspora and student associations.

Kazakhstani student associations and diaspora communities already play a major role in promoting Kazakh culture abroad. Their contribution should be systematically recognized and incorporated into the work of Abai Centers. Closer and more regular cooperation in

planning and implementing events would make the initiative more flexible, socially embedded, and responsive to local contexts, while reducing dependence on a small number of embassy staff.

Introduce a volunteer support mechanism. A recurring issue identified in the study is the shortage of human resources available to support the daily work of Abai Centers. To address this, a volunteer mechanism could be established by involving Kazakh students abroad, diaspora representatives, and participants or alumni of academic mobility programs such as Bolashak. Such volunteers could assist with event organization, translation, outreach, and communication with local partners. In return, they could receive certificates, official recognition, or letters of recommendation. This would strengthen the human resource base of the initiative without requiring major financial investment.

Improve coordination and basic reporting across centers. Abai Centers should function less as isolated local initiatives and more as parts of a connected cultural network. Even a modest coordination mechanism could support the exchange of translated materials, digital resources, event formats, and practical experience across locations. At the same time, the introduction of simple reporting practices on activities, audiences, and partnerships would make it easier to assess progress and reduce the current gap between official narratives and operational realities.

Taken together, these recommendations aim to move the Abai Center initiative from a largely symbolic and unevenly institutionalized project toward a more coherent, accessible, and sustainable model of cultural diplomacy. Their implementation would not only strengthen the practical functioning of individual centers, but also enhance the broader credibility and long-term value of the initiative within Kazakhstan's international image-building strategy.

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APPENDIX A

Interviews List

#	Participant code	Affiliation	Date
1.	Diplomatic mission representative 1	Kazakh diplomatic mission	June 12, 2025
2.	Diplomatic mission representative 2	Kazakh diplomatic mission	July 23, 2025
3.	Diplomatic mission representative 3	Kazakh diplomatic mission	October 7, 2025
4.	Diplomatic mission representative 4	Kazakh diplomatic mission	October 13, 2025
5.	Expert 4	Cultural diplomacy specialist	October 22, 2025
6.	Diplomatic mission representative 5	Kazakh diplomatic mission	October 28, 2025
7.	Expert 1	Cultural diplomacy specialist	November 1, 2025
8.	Diplomatic mission representative 6	Kazakh diplomatic mission	November 3, 2025
9.	Expert 2	Cultural diplomacy specialist	November 12, 2025
10	Diplomatic mission representative 7	Kazakh diplomatic mission	November 17, 2025
11	Student association representative 1	Kaz student association	November 17, 2025
12	Student association representative 2	Kaz student association	November 17, 2025
13	Student association representative 3	Kaz student association	November 18, 2025
14	Student association representative 4	Kaz student association	November 18, 2025
15	Student association representative 5	Kaz student association	November 19, 2025
16	Student association representative 6	Kaz student association	November 20, 2025
17	Student association representative 7	Kaz student association	November 21, 2025

18	Student association representative 8	Kaz student association	November 22, 2025
19	Diplomatic mission representative 8	Kazakh diplomatic mission	February 9, 2026
20	Expert 3	Cultural diplomacy specialist	February 20, 2026

APPENDIX B

Interview Questions

Embassy Representatives

1. What is the mission of the Abai Center in your country? What are the main objectives of the center?
2. What are the main areas of activity implemented by the center (e.g., language courses, cultural events, lectures, exhibitions, partnership projects, etc.)?
3. How is the event program developed? Is there a strategic plan guiding the activities, or do you primarily respond to local demands and opportunities?
4. How many events does the center organize on average per year, and what types of events are most common?
5. Does the center use online formats or digital platforms? If so, how effective are they?
6. Who constitutes the primary audience of the center (e.g., Kazakh diaspora, local citizens, students, researchers, or a mixed audience)?
7. How many people usually participate in the center's events and courses? Has this number changed over time?
8. How does the center attract new audiences and partners in the host country?
9. How is the organizational structure of the center arranged? How many people are involved in its operations?
10. Who works at the center (e.g., teachers, volunteers, members of the diaspora, specialists sent from Kazakhstan)?
11. What are the main sources of funding for the center (e.g., government support, grants, partnerships, sponsors, paid services)?
12. Are the current resources sufficient to achieve the center's objectives? What factors limit its development?
13. Which types of organizations does the center collaborate with (e.g., universities, cultural institutions, municipalities, museums, etc.)?
14. Have you observed an increase in interest in the Kazakh language and culture? What indicators demonstrate this trend?
15. Could you describe the concrete results the center has achieved over the past 1–3 years? For example, how many events were organized, how many people participated, what language programs or partnerships were established, and which projects became permanent?

16. Could you provide examples of specific Abai Center events or projects that you consider most successful? In what ways were they effective in promoting Kazakh culture and language (e.g., audience reach, partnerships, feedback, sustainable outcomes)?
17. Which types of events receive the strongest response from local audiences, and why?
18. What major challenges or limitations does the center currently face? Which factors most significantly limit the center's effectiveness today (e.g., funding, human resources, operational format, institutional support, audience interest)?
19. How do you evaluate the role of Abai Centers as instruments of cultural diplomacy? Which elements of the model work effectively, and which aspects could be improved?

Diaspora and Student Associations

1. Could you briefly introduce yourself? Where in Kazakhstan are you from, and in which city do you currently live and study?
2. Which university do you attend, and which Kazakh student association are you affiliated with?
3. Is it a nationwide association of Kazakh students or a local Kazakh Society at your university?
4. What is your current role in the association?
5. When was the association established, and what are its main goals?
6. Who is your main audience: Kazakh students, the wider Kazakh diaspora, or international students?
7. What key events or activities does your association organize during the academic year?
8. Could you describe one or two events you are particularly proud of and why they were successful?
9. To what extent are your events aimed at international audiences rather than only Kazakh students?
10. Before this interview, had you heard about Abai Cultural Centers abroad?
11. Are there any Abai Centers or similar cultural platforms connected to Kazakhstan where you study?
12. Are there any cultural initiatives related to Kazakhstan or Central Asia in your city (for example embassy events, festivals, or university clubs)?

13. Do you use Abai's poetry, quotations, or image in your association's events or communications?
14. How do you see Abai as a cultural symbol for international audiences?
15. If an Abai Center were established where you study, how should responsibilities be divided between it and student associations?
16. How do people around you (classmates, friends, professors) usually perceive Kazakhstan?
17. What common associations, stereotypes, or questions about Kazakhstan do you hear?
18. Do these perceptions change after people attend your events or interact with your association?
19. Which formats work best for presenting Kazakhstan (for example food, music, cinema, lectures, or collaborations)?
20. Does your association collaborate with diplomatic missions, universities, student clubs, or cultural centers?
21. How is your association's activity funded?
22. What role do Kazakh student associations play in promoting Kazakhstan's culture abroad?
23. What recommendations would you give to support student associations and develop cultural centers abroad?
24. Is there anything important about Kazakhstan's image abroad or the role of your association that we have not discussed?

Experts in Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power

1. From the perspective of cultural diplomacy and soft power, how important are cultural centers as instruments of international image-building?
2. In your opinion, what role can cultural centers play in shaping how foreign audiences perceive a country?
3. How do you assess the concept of Abai Centers as a cultural diplomacy initiative of Kazakhstan?
4. In your view, what advantages does Kazakhstan gain by promoting its culture internationally through institutions named after Abai Kunanbayuly?
5. Based on your expertise, what factors usually determine the success of cultural centers abroad?

6. How important are elements such as credibility, intellectual openness, and cultural authenticity in cultural diplomacy initiatives?
7. In your opinion, what risks do cultural centers face if they are perceived primarily as instruments of state propaganda?
8. What balance should cultural institutions maintain between promoting national culture and maintaining intellectual independence and credibility?
9. How important is local adaptation when cultural centers operate in different social and cultural environments?
10. What types of activities or formats (e.g., language courses, cultural festivals, lectures, digital content) tend to be most effective in promoting a country's culture internationally?
11. How important are partnerships with universities, cultural institutions, and local organizations for the effectiveness of cultural diplomacy initiatives?
12. What role can diaspora communities and student associations play in supporting cultural diplomacy efforts abroad?
13. From your perspective, how can countries effectively integrate diaspora networks into their cultural diplomacy strategies?
14. In your opinion, what institutional challenges might emerging cultural diplomacy initiatives such as Abai Centers face?
15. How important are stable funding, professional staffing, and institutional coordination for the sustainability of cultural centers abroad?
16. What lessons can Kazakhstan potentially learn from established cultural diplomacy institutions such as the British Council, Goethe-Institut, or Confucius Institutes?
17. In your opinion, how can Kazakhstan strengthen the international visibility and credibility of the Abai Center initiative?
18. What policy recommendations would you suggest for improving the effectiveness of Abai Centers as instruments of cultural diplomacy?
19. Looking forward, what role could Abai Centers play in Kazakhstan's broader soft power strategy?