

Astana's Long-Awaited Light Rail Project Finally Nears Completion After Years of Delays and Scandals

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The long-awaited Legko Reilsovyj Transport (Light Rail Transport) project in Astana, Kazakhstan, is finally nearing completion, according to the city's mayor. The project, plagued by years of delays and marred by a major corruption scandal, has been a source of frustration for both the government and the public.

Originally envisioned by former President Nursultan Nazarbaev in 2005, the Lrt project has faced numerous setbacks. Construction was initially suspended in 2013 due to escalating costs, only to be revived in 2017 following an agreement with a Chinese consortium. However, the project soon became embroiled in a major corruption scandal, leading to significant financial losses and widespread public discontent.

Following the Kantar riots in January 2022, President Kasym-Žomart Tokaev initiated a "season of transparency," launching an investigation into the Lrt project. While acknowledging the significant financial losses incurred, President Tokayev deemed it necessary to proceed with the project to avoid further economic repercussions. To enhance transparency and accountability, the project was restructured, and foreign architects and town planners were engaged to oversee the construction process.

Despite these efforts, the project has continued to face challenges, including construction accidents and delays. The opening of the first sections, however, has been met with mixed results, with reports of traffic congestion and safety concerns.

The mayor, Ženis Kasymbek, attributed these setbacks to "unavoidable situations in the construction phase, when the time is too long and too many people are involved." The final costs and payment mechanisms for the project, which includes 22 kilometers of track and 18 metro stations, will be

announced in the summer following the official inauguration.

The Lrt project has become a symbol of the challenges facing Kazakhstan in its efforts to modernize its infrastructure. Despite the numerous setbacks, the project's eventual completion will provide a vital public transportation option for the growing city of Astana.