

Kazakhstan:

Sought extremism bans threaten to eliminate political pluralism

Brussels, Almaty 22 November 2012. The initiative to have two prominent opposition groups and leading opposition media outlets banned on vague “extremism” allegations signals a further escalation in the ongoing attack on free speech and political pluralism in Kazakhstan, International Partnership for Human Rights and Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law said today. It is particularly disturbing as it comes only a week after Kazakhstan **gained a seat** on the UN Human Rights Council, whose members are **expected** to ‘uphold the highest standards’ in the promotion and protection of human rights.

“This move represents a new alarming attempt to silence inconvenient voices who scrutinize and challenge official policies in Kazakhstan,” commented Yevgeniy Zhovtis, Chair of the Board and Expert Consultant with Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law. “It reinforces the impression that the Kazakhstani authorities are trying to make the political opposition the scapegoat for the tragic December 2011 **Zhanaozen events**,” he continued.

Yesterday Kazakhstan’s general prosecutor’s office **announced** that the Almaty city prosecutor’s office has asked a court to ban the Alga party and *Khalyk Maydany* as “extremist” organizations. It also said the same office has requested the termination by court of the publication and distribution activities in the country of the *Golos Respubliki* and *Vzglyad* newspapers and their internet portals, the satellite K+ TV channel and its website, as well as the online Stan TV video portal on grounds of “extremism.” The general prosecutor’s office claimed that the recent court ruling against Alga party leader Vladimir Kozlov and two other opposition activists had “affirmed” that the activities of the two opposition groups and the targeted opposition media outlets, which are all known for their critical stance towards the Kazakhstani authorities, have an “extremist” character.

Following an unfair trial Vladimir Kozlov was sentenced to 7.5 years in prison on vague and politically motivated criminal charges of “inciting social discord,” “calling for the violent overthrow of the constitutional order” and “leading an organized criminal group” on 8 October. Two co-defendants, *Khalyk Maydany* member Serik Sapargali and trade union leader Akzhanat Aminov were found guilty on similar charges, but given suspended sentences. The charges against the three men were related to their alleged role in instigating the December 2011 unrest in the Kazakhstani city of Zhanaozen, when 14 people died and dozens were wounded as a result of the use of force by police. The men were, among others, accused of pursuing their allegedly “extremist” plans through opposition media. On 19 November, Kozlov’s conviction was upheld on appeal, as result of which the ruling in the case took effect.

With reference to this ruling, the general prosecutor’s office argued that the court had established that leaflets disseminated among the striking oil workers by representatives of the Alga party and *Khalyk*

Maydany, as well as speeches made by them in front of these workers contained “incitement to social discord” and “calls for the violent overthrow of the constitutional order.” In a similar vein it argued that the court had found that the coverage by *Golos Respubliki*, *Vzglyad*, K+ and Stan TV of developments in Zhanaozen featured “incitements to social discord” and “propaganda of the violent seizure of power.” The broadly worded **definition of “extremism”** laid down in Kazakhstan’s anti-extremism law covers activities that pursue the kind of objectives to which the prosecutor’s office referred. The same law provides for the banning of “extremist” organizations, while the media law allows for terminating the publication and distribution activities of media outlets that engage in “extremist” propaganda.

“We call on Kazakhstan’s international partners to forcefully speak out against this new misguided anti-extremist measure, as well as Vladimir Kozlov’s imprisonment and to remind the Kazakhstani authorities of their international obligations with respect to freedom of expression and political pluralism,” said International Partnership for Human Rights Director Brigitte Dufour.

Founded in 2005 as the successor to another party banned by court, the Alga party is a vocal liberal opposition party, while *Khalyk Maydany* was initiated as a united opposition movement ahead of the 2012 parliamentary elections. *Golos Respubliki*, *Vzglyad*, K+ and Stan TV are major opposition media outlets that cover developments in the country in an independent and critical manner. These outlets and their journalists have repeatedly faced intimidation and harassment, such as blocked access to their internet sites, raids and inspections of their offices, defamation and other charges, and physical attacks by unknown perpetrators that have gone unpunished. They have been fearing a renewed crackdown for some time given the accusations leveled against them during the trial against Kozlov and his co-defendants, and other recent developments, such as the airing of a scathing **anti-opposition documentary** on state TV channels and the **arrest** in late October of the brother of the *Golos Respubliki* publisher on drug possession charges believed to be fabricated.

In the recent period the general climate in Kazakhstan has also been characterized by growing intolerance of alternative views and growing attempts to stifle freedom of expression **in the media**, among civil society actors and **on the internet**.

See also: joint **statement** by Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law and other Kazakhstani NGOs