The Moscow Times
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Russia Ally Kazakhstan Blocks Ukraine Peace Rally

By AFP

March 19, 2022



Almaty's central Republic Square. **mibuchat / Flickr / CC BY-SA 2.0**

Activists in Kazakhstan said Saturday they were refused permission to hold a rally against Russia's invasion of Ukraine, as tensions over the war spill into Moscow's neighborhood.

Kazakhstan, which enjoys traditionally cordial relations with the West, is seeking a balance between distancing itself from the Kremlin's brutal campaign in Ukraine and not riling its northern ally.

Earlier this month Kazakh authorities allowed activists in the former capital Almaty to hold a rally against the invasion that gathered more than 2,000 people and featured chants and slogans insulting Russian President Vladimir Putin.

But activists on Saturday showed AFP a letter from the Almaty mayor's office refusing them permission to hold a second demonstration, explaining a square designated for

demonstrations was being used for a rally in support of Kazakhstan's President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev instead.

Footage on social media showed several hundred at that gathering on the square in central Almaty.

An AFP correspondent saw participants pack signs with slogans such as "Together with the president" into a van as they prepared to vacate it at 2:00 p.m. local time.

Alnur Ilyashev, an activist who notified authorities of his intent to organize the peace rally for Saturday, told AFP that the organizers of the pro-Tokayev rally had "booked" the square for the whole day, meaning that no other rallies could take place there even after they left.

"In reality they only held (the demonstration) to prevent us from holding our anti-war meeting," Ilyashev told AFP.

Kazakhstan keeps tight control over public demonstrations, which can only be held in designated locations with the blessing of local authorities.

The foreign ministry last month signaled its neutrality in the conflict over Ukraine and said it is not considering recognition of two Russia-backed separatist entities in Ukraine's east.

The move attracted sharp criticism from Margarita Simonyan, the outspoken editor of Russia's state-financed media outlet Russia Today.

Neighboring Uzbekistan's Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Komilov on Thursday said his country supported Ukraine's territorial integrity and called for an immediate end to fighting in the country in a speech in parliament.

Kazakhstan is a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, a six-member security bloc headed by Moscow and the Eurasian Economic Union trade bloc.

Uzbekistan quit the CSTO in 2012 and has observer status in the EEU.

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