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‘The Motherland Is Catching Up’: Russians in Kazakhstan Feel Moscow’s Reach in String of Expulsions

Kazakhstan's reputation as a safe haven for Russian exiles has been upended by a string of planned expulsions of dissidents.

By Brawley Benson

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The city of Astana, Kazakhstan. **Nikolai Burmatov / TASS**

An activist who used to volunteer for an organization run by the late Alexei Navalny in St. Petersburg.

Two Chechens — one fleeing war, the other punishment for criticizing regional autocrat Ramzan Kadyrov.

An IT worker from Crimea who quietly opposed Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and tried to forge a new life abroad.

The profiles of the Russians caught up in a startling new crackdown on Kremlin critics in Kazakhstan embody all the diversity of Russia's wartime emigre population — and the grave risks such people face trying to escape persecution back home.

In a swift reversal of longstanding norms, Kazakhstan has begun planning to deport or extradite several Russian citizens since the start of the year. If sent back, their lawyers say they face lengthy prison sentences, forced conscription and, in some cases, torture.

To make matters worse, experts say the Kazakh government is circumventing the law to make it happen.

"In general, everything that is happening now is such lawlessness," Murat Adam, an Almaty-based lawyer representing two of the Russians under threat of extradition, told The Moscow Times in an interview this week.

The news has unsettled the tens-of-thousands-strong Russian emigre community in Kazakhstan, a Kremlin-friendly nation in Central Asia that was nonetheless seen as a safe haven for refugees fleeing Putin's regime — until recently.

In some sense, the legal guardrails that once protected them seem to have come off. Experts told The Moscow Times that sending citizens back to a country where they face such clear danger violates numerous international human rights treaties to which Astana is an observer.

Related article: Kazakhstan Moves to Extradite Ex-Navalny Volunteer to Russia, Anti-War Group Says

At times, it has not been clear if the country is even playing by its own rules. The deportation of the IT specialist, a 25-year-old dual Russian and Ukrainian citizen named Alexander Kachkurkin, appears to have been carried out in coordination with Moscow without the use of an extradition request.

Kazakhstan's Prosecutor General's Office and Foreign Ministry did not respond to requests for comment.

One Russian living in Kazakhstan, speaking to The Moscow Times on condition of anonymity, said that the news has "caused alarm" in the Russian diaspora community. He is now planning to leave the country.

"Before, I felt I could live peacefully and build a career here," the source said. "But alas, unfortunately, that is now becoming dangerous."

A friend, he said, aptly described the sense of fear: "It's as if the Motherland is catching up."

'For most people, this causes fear and concern for their lives'

For many in a similar position, trying to outrun the Motherland could describe the past four years.

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine sparked an exodus of tens of thousands of Russians fearing persecution or mobilization. Kazakhstan, with its liberal entry regime for Russian citizens, was an attractive destination for many of them. By the end of 2022, as many as 100,000 Russians had moved to the country.

It was and remains an uneasy existence. While Kazakhstan has a process for obtaining political asylum, it is practically never granted. What's more, the country's close relations with Russia have, in recent years, propagated fears of stricter enforcement of Moscow's extradition requests.

Such fears were largely hypothetical until one event in late January.

When IT specialist Kachkurkin was 14, he lived through the annexation of his home region, Crimea, by the Kremlin, an event he never supported, according to a source close to his case.

"Effectively against his will, he was made a citizen of another country," said Yevgeny Smirnov, a lawyer with the human rights group Pervy Otdel.

Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022 was the final straw that prompted him to move to Kazakhstan. It was only supposed to be a temporary solution: Kachkurkin dreamed of moving to Europe or Ukraine.

In late January, he was handed administrative violations for allegedly jaywalking and smoking hookah indoors.

In response, Astana ruled to deport Kachkurkin back to Russia. Immediately upon landing, he was arrested and charged with treason for allegedly transferring money to Ukraine.

Local media have reported that there was no extradition request. The Moscow Times asked Kazakhstan's Prosecutor's Office and Foreign Ministry if the country received such a request for Kachkurkin, but did not receive a response. Smirnov said that he has no knowledge of one in this case.

Now, he is in pre-trial detention in Moscow's notorious Lefortovo Prison, facing a near-certain guilty verdict and a sentence of 12-15 years.

Smirnov said he believes that Astana coordinated with Russia's security services to circumvent traditional extradition processes, which would have opened the door to appeal the move.

"I've probably been involved in several hundred treason cases, so I'm no longer surprised by how they unfold in Russia," Smirnov said. "But I was very surprised by Kazakhstan's approach, the fact that they, at the unofficial request of the FSB, are participating in the kidnapping of a person on their own territory."

The news about Kachkurkin set off a shock wave through the Russian emigre community. If this low-profile, non-activist emigre is vulnerable to Russian law enforcement's hunt for dissidents, many thought, who isn't?

"For most people, this causes fear and concern for their lives," said one Russian living in

Kazakhstan, who requested anonymity due to the sensitivity of the topic. "Several of my friends said that we need to prepare more actively for moving out of Kazakhstan because [now] they can send you to Russia for less."

Those fears seemed to be confirmed this week when Kazakh prosecutors announced that they had approved an extradition request for a different regime critic, 34-year-old activist Yulia Yemelyanova, who has been detained since a layover at Almaty International Airport in August 2025. Her charge? Allegedly stealing a phone worth 12,000 rubles ($155) in St. Petersburg.

Adam, her lawyer, filed a complaint with the country's Supreme Court on Feb. 11, arguing that Yemelyanova cannot be extradited while her application for asylum is under consideration.

The document, shared with The Moscow Times, lays out a dire situation.

"If extradited to the Russian Federation," it reads, "Yemelyanova will face a high risk of torture, inhuman treatment and violation of her fundamental right to a fair trial."

Her legal team fears Yemelyanova could face persecution for volunteering in 2017 with Navalny's Headquarters, the deceased opposition leader's shuttered election organization.

Since leaving Russia, she has also worked with organizations supporting Ukrainian refugees and Russian political prisoners — positions that make her even more of a target, the document states.

Meanwhile, two other men could also be extradited in the coming months: 35-year-old Zelimkhan Murtazov and 30-year-old Mansur Movlayev. Both are from the republic of Chechnya, a tightly controlled region in the North Caucasus whose largely autonomous security forces, the Kadyrovtsy, have a reputation for brutality.

A military deserter, Murtazov has been barred by authorities from leaving Astana's Nursultan Nazarbayev International Airport for over a month.

Kazakhstan agreed to extradite Movlayev in late January after denying him refugee status the month prior. Having suffered torture in Chechnya, Movlayev fled the region in 2022 and has been seeking asylum ever since.

"He fears for his life, fears that he may be killed," reads a complaint to Kazakhstan's Supreme Court obtained by The Moscow Times.

'To a certain extent, it's to please Putin'

The unsettling string of expulsions represents something new for Kazakhstan. A few extraditions — mostly of military deserters — have taken place since Russia invaded Ukraine, but never on this scale.

"Since 2022 until practically last month, Kazakhstan was very, very cautious about these cases," said Yevgeny Zhovtis, director of the Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and the Rule of Law.

“On the one hand, even if people were looking for asylum, Kazakhstan was not granting asylum to anybody,” he said. “But at the same time, they were not preventing them from leaving to a third country.”

Zhovtis said that recent cases set a worrying precedent. They also potentially violate international human treaties such as the 1951 Refugee Convention and the Convention Against Torture, which prohibits extradition to a country where someone could be subject to torture.

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He believes the policy turnaround could be an attempt to keep Moscow happy as the country readies for a constitutional referendum in March, and potential parliamentary and presidential elections after that.

“I think that Kazakhstan doesn’t want to be exposed to some kind of Russian involvement or too much Russian pressure,” he said. “To a certain extent, it’s to please Putin.”

How does a person stay safe under such conditions?

According to one Russian in Kazakhstan, who requested anonymity, the answer is simply to keep one’s head down.

In Russia, before the war began, he had engaged in small-scale activism — sometimes attending protests, other times working as an election observer.

These days, he keeps an even lower profile. While the activist gene is strong — as is the occasional urge to publicly comment on Kazakhstan’s domestic political developments — he resists speaking out. The life he’s eked out is too precarious to risk it.

“As long as I’m silent,” he said, “I think I’m safe here.”

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