

## **Border Row Exposes Kazak-Uzbek Tensions**

**Author:** [Yuliana Zhikhor](#)

Shooting incident blows up into shouting match between Central Asian rivals.

An angry diplomatic exchange between Uzbekistan and Kazakstan over border issues highlights underlying strains in the two countries' relationship. It also indicates that the Uzbek government is more sensitive to criticism than ever.

The war of words broke out on September 22, when the Uzbek embassy in Kazakstan sent a protest note expressing anger at Kazak media coverage of a shooting incident on the border earlier in the month. One Kazak citizen died when Uzbek border guards confronted a group of people trying to slip over the frontier on horseback.

The embassy note said that the way the shooting had been covered in Kazakstan was "irresponsible and tactless".

"It has been reported that the Uzbek side is responsible for the September 4 incident on the Uzbek-Kazak border, and also for other similar cases," it said. "Cases where the Kazak media have reported subjectively and even negatively about the state of relations between Uzbekistan and Kazakstan have become more frequent."

Kazakstan's foreign ministry was quick to respond, describing the Uzbek protest as "interference in its internal affairs".

The ministry questioned the Uzbeks' assertion that the killing was an accident, caused by a stray bullet when the border guards fired warning shots. It contrasted the record of Uzbekistan's frontier guards, who have been involved in five shootings leaving one person dead since last November, with the Kazak force which has not been involved in any violent incident in the same period.

Both governments are clearly annoyed over the issue of the border itself, where the Uzbek authorities unilaterally imposed stringent travel restrictions in December last year.

But the public row is also a sign that the Uzbek government has grown extra-sensitive to criticism in recent months.

Daur Dosybiev, a journalist from Shymkent in southern Kazakstan, says the Uzbek government has always kept a watchful eye on what the Kazak media say about it, but this is the first time that it has publicly expressed its anger.

According to leading Uzbek human rights activist Surat Ikramov, the foreign ministry in Uzbekistan did not use to react so badly to negative reporting of border disputes with its neighbours. He thinks the strident approach taken in the Kazak case is part of a general clampdown on media criticism.

"In the last few months, particularly since the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development meeting held in Tashkent in May, the Uzbek authorities seem to have got sick of hearing constant criticism of them in the media," he said.

Ikramov thinks the harsher line on criticism coincides with the arrival of Sadiq Safaev as Uzbek foreign minister in March. Since that time, the ministry has refused accreditation to a number of journalists working for foreign media outlets.

An expert on Central Asia interviewed by IWPR said he saw a "logical connection between the new, media-savvy leadership at the foreign ministry and the diplomatic note in which Uzbekistan complained about the negative media coverage in Kazakhstan".

Asked whether issuing this kind of protest would not backfire, since it makes the Uzbeks look intolerant of criticism, the expert, who asked not to be named, said, "I believe they do understand that - but they are counting on blocking negative media reports. It's as if they are testing how effective their approach is, and how far they can go."

Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have an uneasy relationship at the best of times. Uzbekistan has ambitions to regional leadership, as the most centrally-placed country in Central Asia with the biggest population. Yet the Kazaks enjoy a better relationship with Russia and have a growing economy, thanks largely to oil. They have also made more friends in the West - at least until September 11 radically increased the United States' interest in Uzbekistan. Uzbek leaders are thus especially sensitive to being cast as the bad guy in Central Asia.

The border closure which forms the backdrop to the latest row is indicative of how Uzbek government decisions have led to poor public relations.

Uzbek citizens started flooding across the border to buy cheaper goods in Kazakhstan after their government imposed swinging customs duties on imports last year. The official response was simply to make it as hard as possible for them to get there.

This method of implementing economic policy through restrictive rules has had a hard effect on people living on either side of the Kazak-Uzbek border. Some have attempted to continue trading - now illegally - by crossing through unpatrolled sections of the frontier. In addition, because local people are uncertain about where the border runs - despite a delineation agreement reached a year ago - they are likely to stray over the border by mistake, and run into the beefed-up Uzbek border guard service.

"There are villages where Uzbeks and Kazaks live together," said Kazak parliamentary deputy Amanjol Bulekbaev. "People have always lived together, and visited each other just by crossing the street. Now this street is a border.

"They still visit each other as they always have done - but now they might get killed for doing so."

Yuliana Zhikhov is a correspondent for Nachnyom s Ponedelnika in Astana. Galima Bukharbaeva is IWPR project director in Tashkent.

**Location:** [Central Asia](#)  
[Uzbekistan](#)  
[Turkmenistan](#)  
[Tajikistan](#)

---

**Source URL:** <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/border-row-exposes-kazak-uzbek-tensions>