

Dirty Tricks" on Kazak Frontier

Author: [Leila Saralaeva](#)

Traders accuse Astana of trying to divert them to a Kazak market.

Disgruntled shuttle traders trapped in a customs bottleneck on the Kazak-Kyrgyz frontier say the Astana authorities have engineered the hold-up to discourage them from using a popular market in Kyrgyzstan.

Traders trying to reach the Dordoi market claim that the strict controls recently introduced by Astana, such as more detailed searches, longer waits and higher duties, are aimed to force them to use a large but mostly empty market in the Kazak border town of Kordai instead.

Traffic through the customs checkpoint in Kordai has been virtually paralysed for two weeks now. More than 500 cars and buses are queued on both sides of the frontier at any given time, and passengers can be forced to wait as long as six hours before their luggage is checked by Kazak border guards.

Trader Karlygash Ismanova told IWPR that customs duties had never been so high at any point during her seven years of trading. "In the last two weeks they began to demand higher customs duty for all goods brought in from Kyrgyzstan, so now it is not profitable to go there at all," she said.

The Kazak authorities claim that controls have been tightened because too few taxes are reaching the state budget from the shuttle traders, but this explanation has not been accepted by Ismanova nor by many of her colleagues.

"Four months ago, a new market, Barys-2, was built in Kordai - but it hasn't proved popular with traders," she said.

"Perhaps someone decided that if customs duty was raised, this would make it unprofitable for us to travel to Dordoi, and make everyone rush to Barys-2 instead."

Barys-2 has been built to a high standard and is better equipped than the crowded and vibrant Dordoi, but the latter has more than 4,000 booths, which are always in use. In contrast, 90 per cent of Barys-2's impressive stalls lie empty.

Similar suspicions were voiced by trader Farida Beisenalieva, who had spent a week camped outside the customs checkpoint waiting for her goods to be cleared.

"They are not letting my goods through the border," she said angrily. "But they let those who work at Barys-2 pass through without any fuss at all and have even told me that I should buy my goods at the Kazak market if I don't want any problems."

According to the manager of the Dordoi market Amanbai Kaipov, his turnover has dropped by 70 per cent, "This is normally high season for us, but the number of traders has dropped dramatically.

"Dordoi has been established for more than 13 years and we are not afraid of competition. We visited

Barys-2 – they’ve made a really good job of it – but they should try to attract customers honestly.

Meanwhile, many others whose livelihoods are dependent on Dordoi and its traders are starting to feel the pinch.

Kasymbek Baimuratov, head of the Sher-Jol company, which transports people back and forth across the border, told IWPR that representatives of the Barys-2 market were lobbying his staff at the customs post.

“They tell the drivers that if they want to work their route, they should only take traders to Barys-2, because the customs officials allow such traders to pass freely,” he claimed.

“But my staff are becoming desperate as none of the traders want to go to that market. They are losing their income, and all have families to support.”

Anatolii Novikov, chairman of Dordoi’s trade union, is convinced that current situation on the frontier is “just a cover-up for measures to give [the Kordai] market an opportunity to function [well].

“Barys-2 seems to think that our people will switch to them and trade there. This is unfair competition.

“Dordoi’s management and traders have written to Kyrgyz prime minister Nikolai Tanaev asking him to solve this problem. It is commonly known that almost all of Kyrgyzstan survives thanks to this major market, and if the problem remains unresolved, both republics will experience social crises.”

But one Kazak customs official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, told IWPR that there was no connection between Barys-2 and the heavier controls at the border.

“Everything is linked to the fact that it is currently mesiachnik [‘inspection month’] in the republic, and the prosecutor’s office is working together with the customs department at all crossing points to prevent the law from being broken,” he said.

“We are bringing to order certain things that used to be done illegally. People are not used to this, so they are looking for someone to blame.”

Ladzhi Idyrov, head of Barys-2, denied that the border restrictions were anything to do with him, and in turn accused the Dordoi management of using “unfair methods” against his market.

“As far as I know, the customs and prosecutor’s office are conducting their own raids [at the border]. We were told that this is a routine annual inspection against smuggling,” he said.

“Also, 70 per cent of our booths have been purchased by Krygyz who trade at Dordoi. But I have traders telling me every day how they have been forced to sign promises that they won’t move to Barys-2. People are afraid to come here because they are being bullied at Dordoi.

“It has come to the point where they have published leaflets about us saying that we are crooks. They have alleged that are forcibly attracting traders with the help of criminal groups. We ignore those

announcements and simply continue our work.”

Meanwhile, a long line of misery continues to stretch from the Kazak checkpoint. Pavlodar businessman Aleksander spoke to IWPR on the tenth day of a marathon wait at the border.

“More than 300 traders from Karaganda, Pavlodar, and Petropavlovsk are living, eating and sleeping crammed in ten buses because we are not being allowed into Kazakstan,” he explained.

“Our nerves are strained and quite frankly we feel ready to blow up the Kazak customs post by now.”

Leila Saralaeva is an independent journalist in Bishkek.

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