

Former Kazakstan Insider's Death Marks End of Plummeting Career

Author: [Karina Kuzembaeva](#)

Feared while in power, Rahat Aliev failed to rebrand himself as an upstanding dissident.

The apparent suicide of Rahat Aliev, one-time son-in-law to Kazakstan's president Nursultan Nazarbaev, follows years in exile and mounting legal problems.

After falling from grace, Aliev tried to recast himself as an opposition leader with inside dirt on the Nazarbaev administration, but in recent years he became less and less visible in this role, which many found wholly unconvincing anyway.

Aliev, who was 52, was found dead in a single cell in a Vienna jail early on February 24. Austrian prison officials said he hanged himself, and a post mortem examination found no signs of anything other than suicide.

Aliev was in custody pending trial for the murder of two bankers in Kazakstan in 2007. The Austrian authorities had twice refused extradition requests from Kazakstan on the grounds that Aliev was unlikely to receive a fair trial, and instead launched their own investigation in 2011.

After living safe from extradition in Malta, Aliev turned himself in to the Austrian authorities last year in the knowledge that they would not send him home. In December, he was formally charged with murder.

In his heyday, Aliev enjoyed the power and privilege that comes with membership of Kazakstan's elite. He was married to the president's elder daughter Dariga, and held a series of powerful government posts including as head of the tax police and deputy head of national security committee.

Family connections and political influence allowed him to amass a business empire which included media like KTK television and the Karavan newspaper and a string of other companies, with funds held in offshore accounts. One of his acquisitions was Nurbank, which would bring about his downfall.

While serving as ambassador to Austria in 2007, Aliev was dismissed from the post as a court charged him in absentia with kidnapping and murdering two Nurbank managers, Zholdas Timuraliyev and Aybar Khasenov. A divorce from Dariga Nazarbaeva soon followed, many believe at the president's instigation.

Later that year, a series of audio recordings appeared on the internet, ostensibly of senior Kazak figures admitting to a series of illegal actions. Aliev was accused of leaking the material to get back at the authorities in Kazakstan, and in public statements he recast himself as an opposition figure willing to speak the truth.

He was convicted of ordering the Nurbank managers' murder in 2008, and also of treason for plotting a coup. He was sentenced in absentia to 40 years in prison. In December 2013, he was named as a suspect in the 2006 assassination of opposition leader Altynbek Sarsenbaev and two associates.

Two bodyguards of former prime minister Akejan Kazhegeldin have testified that Aliev, as second-in-command of the security service at that time, had them tortured for two days to get them to confess that their boss was plotting against Nazarbaev.

Kazak police have looked into the death in 2005 of Anastasia Novikova, said to have been Aliev's mistress. The circumstances of her death in Lebanon and the discovery of her body in an unmarked grave in Kazakstan have never been explained. The investigation was never concluded.

Austrian prosecutors have also investigated allegations that Aliev used a web of companies and offshore accounts to embezzle and launder money.

With such a legacy, Aliev is unlikely to be missed by President Nazarbaev's supporters, or indeed his critics.

Political analyst Aidos Sarym told IWPR that Aliev's death in a foreign prison cell was a tragic end for a figure who was once at the top of Kazakstan society.

"Life in exile is no holiday even if one has lots of money. It's clear he was facing a protracted legal process with the possibility of long-term imprisonment," Sarym said, adding that he regretted that Aliev had escaped justice in the Sarsenbaev murder case.

The analyst dismissed claims that Aliev's death was suspicious. A defence lawyer has cast doubt on the official account and called for an investigation. Sarym argues that since Aliev had no shortage of enemies, they could have got to him long before now, and much more easily.

He said Aliev's life story sounded like the plot of a book or a film.

"At the height of his power, Aliev was involved in corporate raiding, wreaking havoc on the lives and businesses of a number of owners," he said.

Another leading analyst in Kazakhstan, Dosym Satpaev, described Aliev as a broken man who had long ago lost any influence he once had, and was running out of the compromising information he claimed to possess about the Nazarbaev administration.

"Rahat Aliev's political influence was waning. He hadn't published any new revelations over the past year," Satpaev said. "Prior to his death, he was facing serious problems. We all know that his offshore accounts were frozen, so there was financial pressure on him. The people he'd gathered around him had started abandoning him, and his support network was narrowing."

Satpaev and other commentators say that because of Aliev's past behaviour, especially in his security service role, he had few friends in government. Even before he went into exile, Satpaev said, "Aliev was in confrontation with [other] politicians, and the Kazakhstan elite wanted out of the country as he had aggravated so many people."

The same was true even of other elite figures who fell out of favour and became opposition leaders in exile. Former prime minister Kazhegeldin, for example, could never forgive Aliev for his treatment of the two bodyguards, Satpaev said.

Thus, "Aliev was fighting on several fronts," Satpaev concluded.

Satpaev argues that Aliev was not taken seriously as an opposition politician, unlike Mukhtar Ablyazov, a former banker turned opposition leader. Ablyazov faces fraud-related charges in Kazakhstan, and was arrested in France in 2013. Last year, the French authorities refused to send him back to Kazakhstan but approved his extradition to either Russia or Ukraine to face charges there.

Sarym, too, was dismissive of Aliev's "dissident" rebranding effort, arguing that he was not like a real opposition figure driven by ideals and willing to endure life as an outcast.

Political commentator Marat Shibutov disagrees, saying that Aliev did have a place in the opposition-in-exile camp. With Aliev dead and Ablyazov facing extradition, there is only former Almaty mayor Viktor Khrapunov left, he argues.

In Shibutov's view, the diminished ranks of Nazarbaev opponents "reduces the pressure from abroad, and reduces the possibility of [stirring up trouble] to create instability inside the country".

It is unclear where Aliev will be laid to rest, but statements from his lawyer and from his second wife Elnara Shorazova indicate that Kazakhstan is not an option.

Karina Kuzembaeva is a pseudonym for a journalist in Kazakhstan.

Location: Kazakhstan

Topic: Rule of Law
Opposition

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/former-kazakhstan-insiders-death-marks-end>