

Kazak Kiosks in Crisis

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Almaty's mayor declares war on kiosk traders in a bid to smarten up the city.

Almaty's mayor, Viktor Khrapunov, is under fire for a decision to clear the city streets of kiosks and newspaper vendors.

On April 29 the independent newspaper Vremya published a scathing attack on Khrapunov, accusing him of deliberately trying to prevent the distribution of opposition newspapers.

"This decree is going to put newspaper and magazine distributors out of business. The only ones left will be those dealing with major publications like Argumenti i Fakti, Karavan or Dauys, which have been approved by the mayor."

The decree, signed on April 6, was not put into force immediately because of the Eurasia Media Forum, an international conference taking place in the city later that month.

Vremya suspects the city administration is acting on orders from the Kazak government in preparation for elections to the Majilis, the lower house of parliament, this autumn.

Serikbolsin Abdildin, chairman of the Kazakstan Communist Party, agrees. "The authorities are obviously unhappy about the distribution of periodicals that worry them. It's not Khrapunov behind this - it's Nazarbaev. Khrapunov is just trying to curry favour," he told IWPR.

Ostensibly, the purpose of the decree is to clear Almaty of kiosks that do not suit the city's ambitious modern character, but analysts believe the decision is an attempt to gain control of newspaper distribution and take opposition publications off the shelves.

"Of course the main thing is a hidden wish to rein in and make difficult the distribution of undesirable papers," opposition leader Pyotr Svoik told IWPR

Svoik believes Khrapunov's decision will also hamper the growth of small businesses and add to the already large numbers of unemployed people in the city.

This is not the first time Khrapunov has passed legislation on kiosks. In March 2000, he imposed a limit on the number of trading kiosks so as to improve 'the architectural and artistic character of the city'. By the end of that year, the number of kiosks in the city had been reduced from 408 to 278.

Viktor Yambaev, president of the businessmen's association, says that the needs of the public should take precedent over the whims of the authorities. "I understand the mayor's desire to make Almaty a beautiful city so that legitimate business can develop here, but in this instance they need to give people time to find somewhere else to work."

Raushan Sarsenbaeva, a member of the Asar party, says it is very unlikely that the city authorities will do

anything to help those who are put out of work by the removal of the kiosks.

As Irina Savostina, leader of the pensioners' movement Pokolenie, told IWPR, if the removal of kiosks goes ahead, thousands of people will lose their incomes. The most conservative estimate puts the number at 30,000.

The street traders say they cannot afford to operate out of any other premises. The monthly rent for a small shop is between 100 and 400 dollars, while a space in a shopping centre can cost up to 1,500 dollars.

"The goods people sell in kiosks are very cheap and do not require a significant capital outlay, as their customers are from the poorest sectors of society," said Yambaev. "The customers who go to shops have more money and want different goods. The street traders wouldn't even have enough money to buy the right kind of stock, let alone pay the rent."

Abdildin suggests that the decree is also a deliberate attack on small businesses. "It's possible that the closure of kiosks is linked to the large supermarkets owned by very influential people in Kazakhstan."

Although a government commission was set up in 2002 to support small business, sceptics insist that the government is primarily pursuing its own interests. Kazak political analyst Nurbulat Masanov believes that in addition to obstructing the opposition press, the mayor is also trying to please the president.

He said, "Khrapunov is trying to see things as the president would. Nazarbaev is an oligarch who has privatised all the major industries and sees small business as a problem which needs to be got rid of."

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