

Kazak Public Relations Drive

Author: [Alexander Zakharov](#)

Stung by recent western criticism, the authorities are trying to boost the country's image.

Kazakstan's presence at a recent European Parliament Cooperation Committee meeting is being seen as an attempt to polish the republic's tarnished image following a spate of international criticism.

Although opposition representatives and human rights activists are frequent visitors to the assembly's discussions on Kazakstan, the government has rarely shown an interest in its workings.

But at the April 9 meeting of the parliament's cooperation committee in Strasbourg, which was due to discuss the political situation in Kazakstan, Astana was represented by a group including the first deputy foreign minister Kairat Abuseitov and a presidential adviser.

According to Glyn Ford, a British member of the European parliament, it was Kazakstan's highest-ranking official delegation ever to attend a committee session.

Analysts believe this move was part of a foreign ministry campaign to respond directly to criticisms made in a European parliament resolution published on February 13, which condemned human rights violations in the country.

It specifically called on the Kazak government to re-examine the cases of jailed opposition leaders Mukhtar Ablyazov and Galymzhan Zhakiyanov - and also that of imprisoned journalist and human rights activist Sergei Duvanov.

The Kazak government's initial reaction was an angry statement published by the foreign ministry five days later, which said, "The resolution's judgement of the internal political development of this country do not correspond to reality [and are] based on biased information."

The statement continued, "The European parliament did not bother to request information from official sources, and this caused a non-objective resolution to be passed."

However, Ford disagrees. "I don't think that all opposition figures are saints, but it is difficult to believe that so many [of them] are involved in criminal cases," he told IWPR.

He believes that the February resolution made the link between an improved human rights record and an increase in international aid - and that this may have encouraged the Kazak government to be more forthcoming.

The parliament's comments served as a reminder of just how badly Kazakstan's international image has been damaged by the events of the last 12 months. Apart from a crackdown on the opposition, the media was persecuted to such a degree that journalists refer to 2002 as a black year for Kazak press freedom.

The European resolution - the culmination of a wave of international condemnation - led the authorities to

hold an advisory council meeting in Almaty on March 14, to discuss ways of boosting Kazakhstan's image abroad. Chaired by foreign minister Kasymjomart Tokaev, the assembly included parliamentary deputies, politicians, scholars and journalists.

Tokaev then called on the diplomatic corps and parliament to combine their efforts to work to overhaul the West's perception of Kazakhstan. The internal affairs ministry also asked the media to help create a more positive picture of the post-Soviet republic.

But public relations efforts were hit hard on March 30, when United States businessman James Giffen - a former advisor to President Nazarbaev - was arrested in America on suspicion of bribing Kazak officials.

In spite of this, Nazarbaev still places the blame for his country's poor image squarely on the media. One day after Giffen's arrest, the president warned journalists that freedom of speech did not give them the right to damage reputations, or free them from responsibility to society.

Opposition representatives say that it is impossible to create a positive image of the country if the government does not admit to human rights violations and attempt to do something about them.

"We need to stop everything that makes Kazakhstan's image negative - political prisoners, persecution of the press, and the government's refusal to change the election laws," opposition activist Pyotr Svoik told IWPR.

"Only then will Kazakhstan gain the image of a civilised country which deals with its own failings."

Alexander Zakharov is the pseudonym for a journalist in Almaty

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