

Kazak Villagers Go It Alone

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Ignored by the authorities in Astana, two Kazak villages have chosen to express their grievances in a rather unorthodox way.

Kazakstan and Uzbekistan managed to resolve practically all their border demarcation disputes with the signing of a treaty at the end of last year, but the unresolved status of one pocket of land is causing a stir.

Concerned that they will be swallowed up into Uzbekistan, two southern Kazak villages, Bagys and Turkestanets, set up their own independent republic of Bagystan at the end of last year.

The two Kazak villages feel they have been let down by the authorities in Astana whom they blame for conducting what they call an "ostrich policy" towards the region. Astana, for its part, is reluctant to deal with the matter because the area's status remains ambiguous and does not want to complicate its relations with Tashkent by pushing for a solution.

The area fell victim to the soviet habit of switching and swapping territories between constituent republics of the USSR - usually in order to satisfy economic plans. In this case, Kazak land was turned over to Uzbekistan, because it possessed a more agriculturally-based economy.

Locals says the Uzbek claim on Bagys is based on a 1963 map, which shows that the area, formerly part of the Kazak district of Bostandyk, had been handed over to its neighbour.

However, villagers say this is incorrect and point out that there is another map which indicates that they belong to an adjacent district of Sary Agash which is unquestionably part of Kazakstan.

Bagys and Turkestanets villagers think there is a lot at stake in remaining Kazak. If they were to be absorbed into Uzbekistan, they feel they will be treated as second-class citizens, lose their culture and be penalised in schools and at the workplace.

Faced with these impending problems and having no-one to support their cause, locals elected a ten-member parliament, and appointed an elderly teacher Aidar Abdramanov as president and declared independence, in an effort to draw attention to their cause.

However, the December 30 proceedings were interrupted by Tashkent security forces who arrested the assembly members. The president fled during the fray and is still in hiding. If locals hoped this would shake things up in Astana they were to be sadly disappointed.

Besides the ambiguity of the area's status, Astana believes it has good reason not to complicate relations with its neighbour as southern Kazakstan is reliant on gas supplies from over the border. "We should take into account the interests of our people," said Nurlan Seitjapparov, a member of the border delineation committee, "but at the same time we shouldn't damage our relations with Uzbekistan."

Meanwhile, the more time passes the easier it will be, feel villagers, for the Uzbek authorities to de facto swallow up their lands before any legal decision is made on their status. The land may not be strategically important but, for Uzbekistan, the most populous country in Central Asia, it is seen as vitally important to

hold on to every piece of territory.

The first stand-off with the government occurred in 1996 when Uzbek border guards appeared one day and started to mark out the frontier to include Bagys and Turkestanets villages. Locals protested, the soldiers left and the markers were removed.

Then, two years ago, a road sign in the area bearing the Kazak emblem was defaced prompting residents to try to attract attention to their cause - on one occasion attempting to block a motorway linking the two countries.

"We want to live in Kazakstan and are not going to tolerate what the Uzbek authorities are doing," said one Bagys resident.

Some have warned that the younger men in the area would raise the level of confrontation and go after Uzbek border guards if they continued to provoke them. There have been reports of the latter harassing local farmers, attempting to impound their produce on the grounds its being grown, they claim, on Uzbek land.

The affair, though unpleasant for local people, does not appear to create visible tensions between Tashkent and Astana. However, border disputes in this part of the world often escalate and when they do they are often bloody and prolonged affairs.

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