

Kazakhstan: Hacks Stand for Parliament

Author: [Eduard Poletaev](#)

Opposition and government parties look to journalists to spice up their election campaigns.

With little setting them apart, parties contesting the forthcoming parliamentary elections have recruiting dozens of journalists as candidates in an effort to bolster their electoral prospects.

Forty-seven journalists and media figures are standing in the September 19 ballot – almost six per cent of the total number of candidates – representing presidential and opposition parties and some running as independents.

Journalists have stood in elections before but never in such numbers. Their recruitment as candidates is seen as an attempt by political parties – whose policies appear distinctly similar – to gain some electoral advantage over each other.

Opposition parties have been losing their radical edge ever since the 1999 elections, when their

only representative at that time, the Republican People's Party of the former prime minister Akejan Kazhegeldin, whose rallying cry was "Kazakhstan Without Nazarbaev", was denied registration on the eve of the poll.

The Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan, set up two years later by disillusioned high-ranking government officials, renewed the calls for the president to step down. But a number of its members left to form the more moderate AK Jol party in 2002. In the meantime, the DCK's political demands became less strident.

As they limber up for the September ballot, the opposition parties are campaigning on such issues as greater transparency in the management of oil revenues, payment of dividends to investors in the privatisations of the mid-90s and the election of regional governors, who are currently appointed by the president.

At the same time, the pro-government parties, such as the president's Otan party have moved into opposition territory, adopting a number of democratic initiatives. Indeed, at his party's congress this year, Nazarbaev proposed that local administrations, with the exception of regional governors, be elected and that parliament be given more powers in forming a government.

Given the similarity of the various manifestos, Andrei Chebotaryov, coordinator of the Kazak National Research Institute, said parties are hoping to bolster their electoral prospects by appointing local journalists – many of them skilled communicators and well-known to the public – as candidates.

"The opposition is not full of radical slogans at these elections, and several pro-government parties are advancing democratic initiatives themselves," he said. "In these conditions, to work effectively with the masses, it is necessary to draw journalists into politics."

Dosym Satpaev, director of the Assessment of Risk Group, agreed, "It's in the interests of the parties to actively promote their journalist candidates, as many media figures are very well-known and carry as much authority as politicians."

The candidate list of the Otan party includes the head of the Kazinform information agency, Gadilbek Shalakhmetov, and Rakhat television channel director Darya Klebanova, who used to present the popular programme Portrait of the Week.

The Asar party, led by the president's daughter Dariga Nazarbaeva and seen as the main challenger to Otan in this election, boasts several high-profile reporters. They include Sergei Kharchenko, editor of the popular regional newspaper Kostanaiskie Novosti, which also has its own radio and television station; Asar-Kazakhstan newspaper editor Vladimir Rerikh – viewed by many as Nazarbaeva's right-hand man – and Gulnara Iksanova, head of the Kazak branch of the Moscow-based television and radio station Mir, which broadcasts to most former Soviet republics.

Guljan Ergalieva, editor of Soz newspaper and former host of the controversial socio-political television show Public Agreement, will contest a seat on behalf of the coalition Opposition People's Union of Communists and the Democratic Opposition of Kazakhstan. Many of the journalists running as independents are loosely allied with the opposition, such as Seidakhmet Kuttykadam and Marjan Aspandiyarova.

There are other journalists standing as independents who are linked with various interest groups. These include Ramazan Esergepov, editor of the newspaper Nachnyom S Ponedelnika; Jusipbek Korgazbek, who edits the popular Jas Alash newspaper; KTK television presenter Oksana Vasilenko; and several reporters and television hosts from Khabar Agency, Kazakhstan's largest television channel.

Analysts are divided about whether having more journalists in parliament will boost the democratic process.

Talgat Kaliev, deputy editor of Novoye Pokolenie newspaper, said, "Journalists can express themselves clearly, they know the situation in the country quite well, and are aware of the problems that people face."

Oleg Katsiev, director of Internews-Kazakhstan, said, "I would like to believe that journalists who are trying to get into parliament really want changes in society. It's difficult to be optimistic about this. If elected, these people will probably swap their good professional work as journalists for work of an unknown quality in parliament."

Parliamentarians tend to be wary of the journalists-turned-politicians. Some have expressed particular concern over their involvement in drafting laws relating to the media, while others say they shouldn't even be standing for elections.

"There is nothing for journalists to do in parliament – here, you need to work, not chat." deputy Erasyly Abylkasymov told IWPR dismissively. "Journalists should practice their profession and cover events – that's their purpose."

Inna Lyudva is an IWPR project assistant in Almaty and Aigul Alieva, the pseudonym of a journalist in Astana, contributed to this report.

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/kazakhstan-hacks-stand-parliament>