

## **Kazakhstan: Police Prey on Drinkers**

**Author:** [IWPR](#)

Officers roam the streets looking to shake down people suspected of drinking.

“Who said the police could detain me just for drinking?” complained builder Serik Kenesov. “I don’t break the law, I don’t do anyone any harm, but I am detained for an entire night, like a criminal.”

As Kenesov found out, having a drink can be a dangerous business in Kazakhstan. Police can pick up anyone they suspect has been drinking – whether inebriated or not – and throw them in the can for the night.

What makes it worse is that they have an incentive to round up as many people as possible, since they make money by doing so. And those who are detained report that they may be beaten as well as robbed.

The “medical detoxification centre” – better known as the “drying out” centre – is a Soviet institution that was intended to instil sobriety by giving drunks a night in the cells. The offender is then fined and released in the morning.

Kazakhstan has more or less abandoned the Soviet anti-alcohol campaign as an official policy, but the special detention centres live on, and provide police with a good living. Sometimes they rob the people they bring in, and more often they simply pocket fines rather than reporting them.

An informal poll conducted by IWPR in the capital Almaty revealed 20 cases where people were not given receipts for the fines they paid. The fine currently stands at the equivalent of 1,000 tenge – just over six US dollars.

Kazakhstan’s civil code penalises the offence of being “in a drunken state offensive to public morality”. According to Yevgeni Zhovtis, director of the Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law, this somewhat vague formulation is open to misuse, and police can stop and detain people who have been drinking but are not behaving in a disorderly manner.

As a result, anyone who has consumed alcohol is at risk of being pulled in by a roving police squad. Sergei N., a 30-year-old Almaty resident who did not want to give his full name, says he was detained after a party and ended up trussed and beaten in a police cell.

“In March this year I left a café where a group of us had been celebrating a colleague’s birthday, and I was detained by the police,” he told IWPR. “I was walking a bit unsteadily, but I was not doing anything to violate public order.”

He was nevertheless carted off to a drying-out centre, one of three in the city.

“I began to protest, and asked them to let me make a call home, but I was forced into a stinking room,” he said.

Angered by this arbitrary behaviour, Sergei started banging on the locked door. Police came in, beat him

with a truncheon and tied him up. "My wrists were tied to my feet with a thick rope. I was in pain all night, and the police laughed at me," he said.

IWPR interviewed several dozen people with personal experience of being detained, and they confirmed that police often searched people and took any cash they found on them. Some had personal stories to tell, such as construction worker Vyacheslav Grigoriev, 34, who recounted, "When I woke up at the centre in the morning, I was missing 200 dollars, the wages I had received the day before."

When Grigoriev asked the policemen about the cash, they replied that he had not had any money on him when they picked him up.

There are some hopeful signs that theft is becoming less common because of a government clampdown on corruption.

"There are enormous sums of money involved here, and I do not think all of it finds its way into the [government] budget," said Zhovtis. "Quite a high proportion of the revenue from fines received at the detoxification centres stays in the pockets of corrupt police."

Parliamentary deputy Valentin Makalkin agrees that there is corruption, but says that does not mean that the detox centres should be scrapped. Kazak officials were reluctant to discuss the issue, and all three drying-out centres in Almaty refused to comment when IWPR called them.

Many believe the police target people not because they seem drunk or are misbehaving, but because they look sufficiently well-off to be worth shaking down. IWPR was told that police tend to ignore homeless people who are drunk.

"Their favourite spots include places like restaurants and cafes which are visited by people who can afford it," said Zhovtis. "We have a long list of such violations of the law – money is extorted from people and they are thrown in the detoxification centre even when they have committed no breach of the peace"

"I was taken to the detoxification centre with my friends simply because we were drinking a bottle of wine in the park," recounted university student Serik Ibraev. "The police just looked on, and when we took a drink they put us in a car and took us away."

The prospect of spending a night at a detoxification centre is one dreaded by anyone who has experienced them. The cells are underground, with small windows and no ventilation. A typical Almaty centre has several cells, each holding up to 10 people. The iron beds have dirty sheets, and the blankets give off a strong smell of urine.

Anyone who makes trouble will be restrained either in a special chair which has straps for the arms and legs, or by having their arms twisted behind their backs and tied to their ankles. This latter technique is known as the "swallow".

Violence against detainees rarely comes to light. In one case earlier this year, three policemen at a drying-out centre in Almaty were sentenced to up to 18 months imprisonment after a man was badly beaten in detention. They were brought to trial after the victim Almaz Kainazarov – himself a doctor – filed documents showing that he had suffered head injuries, burns, and extensive bruising.

Human rights activists believe that aside from such extreme cases, the whole procedure of detaining people for drinking is flawed and unlawful.

“We believe that putting drunk people in the detoxification centre is illegal,” said Zhovtis. “It results in a unique situation - a court ruling is needed to detain a person for an administrative offence, but just for drinking you can be held for days without any court verdict, and be fined on top of that.”

Zhovtis’s human rights group plans to challenge the practice in Kazakhstan’s supreme court.

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