

Kazakstan: Uncivil Forum

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Non-government groups fear government will use "dialogue" process to control them.

The Kazak authorities are promising an open, unconditional meeting to improve their relationship with the non-government sector - but even before the talks get under way, many organisations fear the real agenda is to curb their freedom.

The Civic Forum, due to take place in the capital Astana this October, is modelled on a similar event already held in Russia. It has been headlined as Kazakstan's first ever attempt to bridge the gap between government and the "third sector", a concept which includes a huge diversity of non-government organisations, NGOs, working on anything from human rights abuses to local social concerns.

When NGOs met earlier this month to pick delegates and discuss tactics for the meeting, many came away feeling that the selection process had been hijacked by pro-government NGOs.

Although they sound like a contradiction in terms, "government-organised non-government organisations" or GONGOs are a feature of post-Soviet Kazakstan and other Central Asian countries. At best, they fulfil a real function while remaining closely tied in with the authorities; at worst they are set up and sponsored by government in an attempt to sap public support - and funding from foreign donors - from active NGOs.

NGO representatives who turned up for the meeting, organised by the mayor's office in Kazakstan's second city Almaty, found themselves presented with a list of pre-selected delegates, which was pushed through without any real discussion. There was a vote, but many eyewitnesses said the process was confused with many procedural irregularities.

"These elections were fixed in advance," said Roza Akyzbekova of the Bureau for Human Rights and the Rule of Law. "Attempts to discuss this or that [alternative] candidate were simply swept aside."

The choice of candidates from Almaty was particularly important, since about one in three NGOs are based in the city, Kazakstan's former capital. Most of the delegates selected to represent Almaty had close links to the city government. There was uproar as people stood up to complain about some of the most significant omissions from the list: leading human rights campaigners Yevgeny Zhovtis and Ninel Fokina, and Valentina Savostina, who heads Pokolenie, a pensioners' movement.

"The selection criteria were correct, but for some reason it was organisations that did not meet them that were selected," Akyzbekova told IWPR.

Almaty deputy mayor Akhan Bijan, who chaired the meeting, denied any fixing had gone on, "All the delegates on the list were selected by the meeting's organising committee, which consists of NGO representatives, so you shouldn't be putting this question to me."

The discomfort felt by participants was all the greater because the October forum has a controversial new NGO law on the agenda, which they fear will cut away at their rights. If the conference is packed with pro-government people there will be little chance of real debate.

"It is most likely that the pro-government NGOs will vote for a law that is similar in nature [i.e. favouring the government]," said Svetlana Pozniakova, representing an NGO that works with young people.

She predicts that the Civic Forum will be no more than an exercise in window-dressing for the Kazak authorities,"International organisations which are invited to attend the Astana forum will witness a dialogue between pro-government NGOs and government agencies.

"And then no one will be able to criticise the government if it adopts a law which restricts the activities of NGOs."

Pozniakova is concerned that the new law will allow NGOs to be defined as "socially beneficial" and "not socially beneficial" - terminology that would allow the government to close down at will any organisation that it does not like.

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Location: Stavropol
Russia
North Ossetia
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Focus: Central Asia

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