

## **Setback Likely for Kazaks' OSCE Hopes**

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Despite the government's optimism, local observers predict Kazakhstan's bid to chair the OSCE in 2009 will be turned down.

While most analysts now expect that Kazakhstan's bid to chair the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe in 2009 will be unsuccessful, some believe it suggest that it could get another chance two years after that.

A rejection for the 2009 chairmanship would be a blow to Astana, implying that it had failed to reach required standards of democracy and human rights, but local analysts say they do not fear a backlash in these areas if the bid is turned down.

OSCE foreign ministers are expected to take a final decision on Kazakhstan's application when they meet on November 29-30.

Kazak officials have been lobbying hard to win the rotating chairmanship in 2009, as a way of winning acceptance as a major international player.

However, some of the OSCE's western members do not believe the chair should be handed to Kazakhstan when the country falls down on many of the democratic principles to which participating states have signed up. OSCE foreign ministers were expected to rule on the Kazak bid last December but concerns about whether Astana had achieve key benchmarks led to the decision being delayed by a year.

Publicly, Kazak officials remain upbeat about their country's chances. In a November 12 interview for the *Vremya* newspaper, Kazak foreign ministry spokesman Ilyas Omarov said it was premature to suggest the bid might fail.

However, the reason for his confidence seemed come down to the lack of a rival candidate for the OSCE chair.

"Kazakhstan is the only candidate for 2009. There are simply no other applicants," he said.

Spanish foreign minister Miguel Angel Moratinos, whose country holds the OSCE chairmanship this year, has indicated that member states are still divided on the issue.

"We hope and are sure that this is an excellent opportunity for Kazakhstan, Central Asia, and the OSCE as a whole," he said in a speech on October 29. "For now, there is not a final consensus regarding the date of the chairmanship by Kazakhstan, but... Spain is actively seeking to build a consensus amongst all OSCE states on this important decision."

Most analysts believe it is unrealistic to expect a positive decision when foreign minister gather next month, pointing to recent developments which have probably made Kazakhstan's chances worse rather than better.

In August, President Nazarbayev's Nur-Otan party won every seat in the lower house of parliament, in an elections which external observers said did not meet international standards of fairness.

Then in late October, the authorities came under fire from media-watchers after they blocked access to internet sites that were carrying transcripts of what were alleged to be damaging phone conversations by senior officials.

Dosym Satpaev of the Risk Assessment Group in Almaty agrees that the 2009 bid now looks unlikely.

One compromise, however, would be to offer the Kazaks a chance to win the chair in 2011, the next available date. Satpaev believes that is on the cards. "They will propose that our country is made a candidate for 2011 and will lay down a number of preconditions for that," he said.

However, if the 2011 date is put forward, Satpaev believes Kazak diplomats will lobby to ensure no additional conditions are attached.

Satpaev is concerned that rejection could push Kazakstan closer to some of its former Soviet neighbours which are also in the OSCE but would like to see the security grouping devote less attention to examining members' democratic and human rights credentials – specifically theirs.

"They have tried to shift the focus of the OSCE's work from protecting human rights to other areas such as security and energy provision."

Satpaev believes that if the OSCE was forced to move in such a direction, it would harm the grouping's reputation for upholding rights and freedoms and would provide a pretext for restricting its mandate in some states.

Kazak journalist Ruslan Bakhtigareev shares these concerns. Writing in Vremya on November 12, he said that if Kazakstan's bid is rejected, some of its partners in the Commonwealth of Independent States will press for changes to the OSCE.

A joint proposal has recently been put forward by Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Armenia, Belarus, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, which they hope will appear on the agenda of the November meeting. They want election monitoring to be introduced in all 56 member states – in other words not just in the undemocratic ones – and to restrict the size of OSCE election monitoring missions to 50.

Human rights activists are not predict that the Kazak authorities will become more - or less - oppressive if they fail to get the OSCE chair.

Sergei Duvanov, a journalist with Inkar-Info radio, said, "There is a lot of pressure on human rights organisations in Kazakstan. The overall trend towards clamping down on them will continue regardless of whether Kazakstan's bid is successful or not. The authorities show no visible signs of trying to conform to the OSCE's [democratic] principles."

Another Almaty-based political analyst, who wished to remain anonymous, agreed that the outcome will have little bearing on the situation inside Kazakhstan.

“The government controls the situation tightly. The majority of the population is apolitical and neutral on political matters, and the opposition has a limited influence on society – as was demonstrated during the [August] parliamentary election,” he said.

Kanat Berentaev, deputy director of the Almaty-based Centre for Public Policy Analysis, believes the aspiration to lead the OSCE comes from President Nursultan Nazarbaev himself, who he says sees his own interests and the national interest as one and the same thing.

“If Kazakhstan achieves something positive, it is due to his personal efforts. If the president is successful at something, it is an achievement for Kazakhstan,” said Berentaev.

Esbergen Tumat is the pseudonym of a journalist in Almaty.

**Location:** Central Asia  
Uzbekistan  
Turkmenistan  
Tajikistan

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