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### Kazakhstani Activist Jailed: Silencing the Opposition Leader and His Party

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By: Katherine Keally |  [Printer Friendly](#)

On October 8, Vladimir Kozlov, leader of the Alga! opposition group in Kazakhstan, was sentenced to seven and half years in prison for crimes supposedly related to his participation in a labor strike. Although officially an unregistered party, Alga! is considered to be the main opposition to autocratic Kazakhstani President Nursultan Nazarbayev, who has strictly controlled the government for the past twenty years.

Kozlov was convicted of encouraging dissent against the government through promoting violence among striking oil workers in 2011, BBC reported. The state accused him of collaborating with Mukhtar Ablyazov, a former outspoken opposition leader to President Nazarbayev and previous chairman of the BTA Bank, who currently faces fraud charges in the United Kingdom (UK) after fleeing there in 2009. Two additional activists were convicted along with Kozlov for their participation in the strike, though they received less harsh sentences. According to Eurasia.Net, Serik Sapargaly, a political activist, and Akzhanat Aminov, an oil worker from Zhanaozen, both received suspended sentences.

Not only has Kozlov's arrest suppressed Nazarbayev's main opposition leader, but it will also severely weaken the Alga! opposition party as a whole. During Kozlov's sentencing, the court mandated the seizure of Kozlov's assets and property, which included Alga! property listed in Kozlov's name. Rico Isaacs, a specialist in Kazakhstani politics at Oxford Brookes University, told Eurasia.Net that "Alga! is the only party which provides regular scrutiny and oversight of the Kazakh authorities," and it will now "most likely cease to exist." Mihra Rittmann of Human Rights Watch (HRW) emphasized the lack of political alternatives besides the Alga! party: "By rendering a guilty verdict, the authorities are silencing an outspoken opponent and muzzling the Alga! party, one of Kazakhstan's few alternative political voices."

Kozlov's trial further highlighted the risks to political freedom within Kazakhstan. HRW reported that "independent observers who monitored proceedings [found] numerous due process violations [that] compromised Kozlov's right to a fair trial" and described Kozlov's conviction as "follow[ing] an investigation shrouded in secrecy and an unfair trial." The Kazakhstan National Security Committee (KNB), which led the investigation against Kozlov, did not disclose evidence against the defendant prior to the trial, said HRW, in addition to presenting phone conversations during the trial that had been recorded without Kozlov's knowledge and cut to distort the meaning of the full conversations. Kozlov and his defense team had only one day to read a poorly translated 700-page indictment, and the defense was often denied the right to cross-examine witnesses. On the day of the conviction, HRW noted that a flight carrying civil society activists and one of Kozlov's lawyers was delayed, possibly to disrupt their travel to the trial. Kozlov denied the charges against him as an effort on the part of the Nazarbayev administration to suppress support for the opposition and is appealing the conviction. However, Kazakhstan's Foreign Ministry Spokesman, Atlay Abibullayev, rejected Kozlov's claim, saying "the legal basis for political pluralism is fully in place in Kazakhstan," reported Eurasia.Net.

Despite the numerous hindrances to a fair trial, the international response to Kozlov's arrest has been somewhat muted. According to Eurasia.Net, the United States (US) has placed the value of its relationship with the Kazakhstani government over pressing for protection of human rights in the region. The US Embassy Statement regarding Kozlov's conviction demonstrates "concern regarding the prosecution of Vladimir Kozlov and the apparent use of the criminal system to silence opposition voices," while simultaneously stressing the value the US places on its "strategic partnership with the Republic of Kazakhstan and its commitment to greater openness and democracy." Eurasia.Net suggested that Kazakhstan is particularly valuable to the US for its role in the Northern Distribution Network, which the US is using to send military equipment out of Afghanistan. Kazakhstan has generally been commended for its relative stability in the region, reported Reuters, "despite never having held an election judged fair by international monitors."

Oil workers, who Kozlov was convicted of supporting, participated in labor strikes for higher wages from May to December 2011 in the Kazakhstani town of Zhanaozen; however, the strikes turned deadly on December 16 when authorities fired on protesters, leaving 11 dead and 86 injured. While police claim they fired in self-defense, BBC reported that eyewitnesses believed the protesters were unarmed. Protestors destroyed equipment on a stage set up to celebrate Kazakhstan's Independence Day, in addition to setting fire to numerous buildings in the town. Protests then began in the Mangistau region's capital, Aktau, in response to the violence, resulting in 11 deaths in two days.

#### For previous news on Kazakhstan, please see:

[International Monitors Criticize Kazakh Parliamentary Election](#)

#### Sources:

[BBC – Kazakhstan opposition leader jailed](#)

[BBC – Kazakh Zhanaozen oil unrest spreads to regional capital](#)

[EurasiaNet.org - Kazakhstan: Political Trial Fails to Provoke Pussy Riot-Style Outcry](#)

[Freedom House – Third Monitoring Report Shows Grievous Violations of the Right to a Fair Trial in Kozlov Process](#)

[Human Rights Watch - Kazakhstan: Opposition Leader Jailed](#)

[Reuters - UPDATE 2-Kazakh opposition leader jailed after oil town unrest](#)

[The United States Diplomatic Mission to Kazakhstan – U.S. Embassy Statement](#)