

## No place for opposition in Kazakhstan

For over two decades the former Soviet republic Kazakhstan has been under the rule of Nursultan Nazarbayev, who made his mark not only with the construction of a new capital (the picture shows the city centre of Astana), but also with his harsh crackdowns on dissidents. One of the political opponents of the regime reports from Geneva, his present place of residence.

## The long arm of the Kazakh dictator

A political feud in Central Asia stretches to Lake Geneva

**Four years ago Victor Khrapunov, who had been a long-serving member of the Kazakh ruling elite, loaded his belongings on a plane and set off to Switzerland. Now he is turning into a critic of Nazarbayev's regime.**

Andreas Rüesch

A few days ago a new place of interest appeared in the Kazakhstan's industrial metropolis Almaty. Just in time to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the former Soviet republic's declaration of independence, the local authorities erected a larger than life-size bronze sculpture of a person, who has been ruling the country with a firm hand for the past two decades - Nursultan Nazarbayev. The monument depicts the president in a sitting position, as an awe-inspiring governor protected by ostentatious eagle wings in the background. This event marked a new milestone in the personality cult of the 71-year-old autocrat. The way to this honour had been paved by the complaisant parliament which last year proclaimed Nazarbayev "leader of the nation" (the Kazakh "Elbasy") and guaranteed him life-long privileges like immunity and protection against any criticism.

### Oppositionists in exile

At the same time Nazarbayev is trying hard to maintain the fiction of a democracy in the country. Recently he dissolved the parliament and brought forward the date of the election in January. Apart from the ruling pro-presidential party Nur Otan it is necessary for him to have at least one more group in the lower chamber of the parliament. There is no doubt that a new parliament will also dance to Nazarbayev's tune. For many years true opposition parties have been suppressed in Kazakhstan, so that the range of the candidates running for the election can be manipulated from the very beginning.

In this system of a sham democracy the regime is threatened not by a few resolute human rights activists or dissidents within the country. Occasional tensions in the governmental structures are mainly caused by inner conflicts in the Kazakhstani ruling elite. The most important opponents of Nazarbayev are all his former supporters, who were once involved in an inner power struggle and were forced to go into exile.

In such a way in the late 90ies the former long-serving prime minister Akeshan Kazhegeldin escaped abroad where he began an unsuccessful campaign against the president. In 2001 some of the prominent members of government challenged Nazarbayev with the foundation

of an opposition party, which soon became a target of state persecution. A leading figure of the opposition party, the former minister of energy and a banker Mukhtar Ablyazov is now in Great Britain, where he has already received a political asylum and is actively engaged in the criticism of the Kazakhstan's regime. Another thorn in the side of Nazarbayev is his former son-in-law Rakhat Aliyev. In 2007 the former security officer and ambassador in Vienna fell out of favour and since then has revealed many scandalous facts concerning the inside life of the regime.

### **A carefully planned step**

Victor Khrapunov, now residing in Geneva, has recently become an active critic of Nazarbayev's regime. Like the above-mentioned political figures, the 63-years-old Viktor Khrapunov once made his career in the Kazakhstan's leading circles. At the end of the Soviet times he, an ethnic Russian, together with Nazarbayev belonged to the communist party nomenclature and held important offices like minister of electric and coal industry - one of the most significant economy branches of the Central Asian republic.

In 1997 the Kazakhstan's head of state appointed Mr Khrapunov mayor of Almaty, in 2004 – governor of the East-Kazakhstan province, and in 2007 he became minister of civil protection. In the same year he tendered his resignation under pressure from the government accusing him of corruption. Under the pretext of a health treatment Mr Khrapunov could take up his residence in Switzerland, where he and his family had already bought a villa for 32 million Swiss francs in Cologny on the bank of Lake Geneva. An appropriate transport vehicle befitted his standing: the expelled minister together with his wife, a successful businesswoman Leila Khrapunova, chartered a large passenger aircraft and filled it with all their belongings they did not want to leave in their native country.

The emigration had been planned well in advance. As early as 2004 they decided to make this step, says the couple. With increasing frequency they confronted with the prominent figures from the inner circles of power, in particular with the most influential daughter of the president – Dariga Nazarbayeva. Mr Khrapunov had a lot of collisions with the president's daughter in politics and his wife in business. As Mr Khrapunow says, in 2004 Dariga Nazarbayeva handed him over a list of candidates and demanded in an ultimatum that he should guarantee their victory at the election. Another time she sought to force him to appoint her trusted person as his own deputy. Mr Khrapunov refused in both cases, running into the hostility of the president's daughter. Similar situations experienced also his wife Leila, who had founded the country's first private television channel and had for a short time been minister of electronic media. Dariga Nazarbayeva who also strived for the role of the media princess rudely pushed her out of the media business.

Nowadays, being out of favor with Kazakhstan's leadership, Victor Khrapunov sees Nazarbayev as an unscrupulous and totally corrupt dictator. According to him, all mass media and the courts are under Nazarbayev's unyielding control, and he most certainly has no intention of resigning and leaving his post. "This ruling body won't rest until it ensures that the president has total and unquestionable power," says the Kazakh exiled to Geneva. He goes on to accuse the nation's leader of enormous self-enrichment. "I would never have thought that Nazarbayev could manage to turn the vast Kazakhstan into a small company with the goal of amassing wealth for his own family."

It really does seem like the former communist apparatchik is running the country like a private holding company. Large governmental companies that bring the nation over two thirds of its GNP are united in the single "Samruk-Kazyn National Prosperity Fund" controlled by Nazarbayev's son-in-law Timur Kulibayev. According to information from

sources in the opposition, Kulibayev amassed vast assets on the side, which starting in September of 2010 has led him to being the central focus of an investigation held by the Swiss Federal Prosecutor's office due to suspicions of money laundering.

### **A scandal with consequences**

There is one particularly noteworthy aspect of Victor Khrapunov's biography. Unlike other "renegates" he did not throw himself at the public but instead spent nearly four years alone on the bank of Lake Geneva. His 26-year-old son Iliyas unexpectedly became a sensation in the news due to his large real estate projects in the French-speaking part of Switzerland and was instantly featured by the Swiss economics magazine Bilanz in a list of 300 wealthiest people in the country. Yet everything remained silent and calm around Mr Khrapunov. Just this autumn the former top functionary who had previously not given any interviews began meeting with the public. So what happened? On the one hand, Victor Khrapunov explains his actions by stating that he has acquired a new understanding of the repressive nature of the ruling regime in Kazakhstan, which is an impression that is recognizable even over long distances. On the other hand, he makes no secret of the fact that his reaction is caused partly by the campaign aimed against him in his native country.

According to information from Kazakhstan, over the past several months the judicial authorities there have concocted six criminal cases against Victor Khrapunov. The government-controlled mass media outlets suddenly began searching for shady spots in his career record. Meanwhile, his relatives who remained in the country were assailed by repressions from the nation's administrative forces. Taking into account the fact that Mr Khrapunov was left alone for years, it seems unlikely that the whole affair is a late search for the truth led by authorities. Mr Khrapunov's explanation appears far more convincing. He claims that his son's marriage with the daughter of the opposition leader Ablyazov led him to being considered as part of their clan. Kazakhstan's national security chief did not mince words when explaining to Khrapunov on the phone this spring that he saw Iliyas as a full-fledged national traitor.

Khrapunov Jr. was specifically accused of being allied with Ablyazov when the latter pulled out into the light the most intense corruption scandal concerning Nazarbayev's circle back in early 2010. Documents possessed by Ablyazov contained proof that Kulibayev, Nazarbayev's son-in-law, put hundreds of millions of dollars into his own pockets during the process of privatizing governmental shares in Kazakhstani raw material companies. Along with that to light came a bank document that supposedly proved Kulibayev's intent of transferring 600 million dollars from UBS to Credit Suisse. It is not farfetched to assume that it was these suspicious circumstances that led to the criminal case against Kulibayev opened by the Swiss Federal Prosecutor's office.

### **Mutual insults**

According to Mr Khrapunov's statement, the rising scandal was similar to a blast of a "political atomic bomb" amidst the ruling forces in Kazakhstan. Just like the "Kazakhgate scandal" that ten years ago shone light onto the Kazakhstani ruling elite's accounts in Geneva, the exposure of Nazarbayev's son-in-law resulted in a strike directly at the prestige of the nation's leader. Khrapunov denies that his son had anything to do with it and has already warned powerful circles in Astana not to drag his family into squabbles with Ablyazov.

Yet that is exactly what happened. Kazakhstani mass media outlets began letting forth more and more reports connecting the Khrapunovs family's wealth to criminal activity with six criminal cases apparently being used to further fear tactics. In return, the former functionary decided to put an end to his silence. He denied the accusation of self-enrichment while holding a governmental post. According to him, his fortune consisting of "tens of millions of dollars," which was used to buy his Geneva villa and realize his son's real estate projects, was amassed thanks to his wife's business activity. Accusations of self-enrichment fit those opposing Khrapunov much more. During his time as mayor of Almaty he was able to observe as two dozens of the dictator's trusted people blatantly acquisitioned lands in natural reserves to the south of Almaty for private estates. The list of these profiteers put together by Mr Khrapunov essentially depicts who's who among the Kazakhstani elite.

It is still unknown whether these painful exposures will make Kazakhstani authorities leave Victor Khrapunov alone or not. Though either way, Mr Khrapunov has recently submitted a request for political asylum to Swiss authorities.