

Query response

Uzbekistan: Return situation of Uzbek nationals who have resided abroad

- What happens to Uzbek nationals who return to Uzbekistan after having resided abroad?
- Interrogation upon return
- Has the situation changed under the newly elected president?

General information about the return situation of Uzbek nationals

The situation of Uzbek nationals who return to Uzbekistan after having had their asylum application rejected in another country has been a topic which Landinfo has investigated during several fact-finding missions to Central Asia. One of the questions relevant sources have been asked is whether applying for asylum in another country in itself may provoke a reaction from the authorities. Another question is whether the situation of former asylum seekers differs from the situation of those who return after having stayed abroad as migrant workers. Sources have also been asked whether the mere fact of having lived abroad may arouse suspicion by the authorities.

The return situation of Uzbek nationals is described in Landinfo's report *Uzbekistan: Overvåking av befolkningen og situasjonen for returnerte asylsøkere* [Uzbekistan: Surveillance of the population and situation of returned asylum seekers] (Landinfo 2015). This query response provides updated information to the prior report, and is mainly based on information gathered from sources during an official mission to Osh (Kyrgyzstan) in October 2016, in addition to press articles on the same subject.

Landinfo's report (2015) refers to statements by the established sources Human Rights Watch (HRW) and the Russian human rights organisation Memorial, regarding the question of whether the arrest and conviction in 2014 of six former asylum seekers from Uzbekistan is likely to attract increased attention to Uzbeks returning after having applied for asylum in Norway. HRW stated that it is difficult to know who runs a risk of criminal prosecution upon returning. HRW assessed that the arrest and conviction of the six would not cause a general suspicion towards all Uzbeks who have resided in Norway and who have returned or been sent back to Uzbekistan, although HRW did not substantiate this assessment. At the same time, HRW pointed out that

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several high-profile Uzbeks are living in exile in Norway and Sweden and that Norway may therefore attract more attention than some other countries. Memorial was of the opinion that it is difficult to draw any conclusion as to what awaits asylum seekers who return from Norway, and that mere chance may decide who will be affected. Memorial and HRW (interviews in Oslo, February 2015), as well as an Uzbek human rights activist (interview in France, February 2015) considered that there are informants in the Uzbek diaspora in Norway, and also in Sweden, who inform the Uzbek authorities on activities of Uzbeks abroad.

Memorial and HRW (interviews in Oslo, February 2015) stated that the activities of Uzbeks abroad will be decisive for what will happen to them in case of return. This was also asserted by an Uzbek human rights activist during a meeting in Bishkek (October 2015), who considered that activities abroad and contacts with Uzbeks who are perceived as oppositionists/religious,¹ are a decisive factor for assessing whether Uzbeks are likely to have problems with the authorities upon return. Both HRW and Memorial was of the opinion that the nature of the activities abroad is more important for possible reactions in the event of a return to Uzbekistan than the fact that a person has been an asylum seeker or a migrant worker (interviews in Oslo, February 2015). Memorial considered that the Uzbek authorities do not make a very sharp distinction between asylum seekers and migrant workers.

Interrogation upon return

Several sources have stated that Uzbeks returning from abroad may risk being held back at the airport for an interrogation (Uzbek human rights activist, interview in France in February 2015; Uzbek journalist (a); Uzbek journalist (b); ethnic Uzbek researcher, interviews in Osh in October 2016). Whether they will be released or held back, and prosecuted at a later stage, depends on their profile and their former activities in their home country and abroad. According to the Uzbek human rights activist in France, the security service keeps lists of all those who have applied for asylum and of those who otherwise have been active in some way or other. The authorities carry out investigations to check if a person has engaged in religious activities. According to the same source, the authorities have databases of persons who are active on the internet and/or have written articles or taken part in various events. The source also pointed out that it is still possible for someone to be arrested at home by the police up to two or three months after having been interrogated at the airport.

A researcher of Uzbek origin and with Kyrgyz citizenship, who is an expert on ethnic and religious minorities, points out that he has himself been held back on two occasions by the security service on arrival in Tashkent after having been in Turkey. In conversations lasting for about thirty minutes, he was questioned about his stay abroad. The police search the luggage of those who are held back at the airport. The interrogation is usually carried out by two persons. Persons are interrogated upon return in order to obtain information from them. For members of the security service, this is also a way to rise in rank, by showing that they have power and control over the population, according to the source. If the security service does not find anything of interest, the person is released. The researcher further states that having been in Europe outside Russia draws more attention than having been in Russia. Most of those who travel to Russia are ordinary migrant workers. If someone returns from Norway, the authorities

¹ Religious in the sense of practising one's religion outside the lawful practice of Islam as defined by the Uzbek authorities. See Landinfo's report (Landinfo 2016, p. 6) for a more detailed definition.

know that the person in question has applied for asylum, because it is unusual for Uzbeks to go to Norway only to work. According to the researcher, not everyone returning to Uzbekistan has to undergo so-called ‘verification interviews’, but those who have been in Turkey are singled out and interviewed (researcher, interview in Osh in October 2016). Landinfo understands that there are no direct flights between Syria and Uzbekistan and that Uzbeks return from Syria via Turkey. Uzbek authorities are therefore particularly attentive to persons returning from Turkey, who may be suspected of having terrorist links (interview in Osh, October 2016). The information that special attention is given to persons returning from Turkey agrees with information from several other sources (journalist (a) October 2016; international organisation, Bishkek 2015; Uzbek human rights activist, Bishkek October 2015).

According to an Uzbek journalist (a) who has lived in Kyrgyzstan for most of his life, but who through his travels and his relatives and on account of his profession as a journalist is well-informed about the current situation in Uzbekistan (Osh, October 2016), Uzbeks returning from abroad can be divided into different categories. One category consists of Uzbeks who have been abroad on business trips. They do not have any problems with the authorities upon return. State-employed persons, such as teachers and government employees, constitute another category. When they return to their home country, they may be held back and subjected to a security check. Some of them may be forced to collaborate with the security service. Migrant workers are also part of this category. In this category, some persons are held back and interrogated whereas others are not. The third category consists of persons who are active as human rights workers. They will be interrogated upon their return, according to the journalist (a).

Another source, a journalist (b) (interview in Osh, October 2016) who also has travelled often between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, stated that the authorities are especially attentive to persons coming from Turkey and also from Russia, and these are subjected to a thorough check because they are suspected of belonging to extremist organisations abroad. This source also explained that elderly persons, from 55 and upwards, are rarely held back upon return. The authorities do not consider them a threat and are less wary of them. Landinfo has previously obtained similar information from other sources (two Uzbek human rights activists, interview in Chimkent, October 2014).

The Uzbek journalist (a) also stated that in 2016, during the summer and autumn, the Uzbek security service, in collaboration with the mahallas,² visited families of Uzbeks living abroad in order to gather information about them. Uzbeks living abroad have reportedly received phone calls from the security service asking them to return to Uzbekistan (Osh, October 2016). Landinfo has previously been informed that such visits were also carried out from the middle of February till the middle of March 2016, during which period the relatives of about 75,000 Uzbeks living abroad were visited and interrogated. Uzbeks living abroad reportedly also received phone calls from the Uzbek authorities. According to Memorial, this was all part of a campaign to keep control over the population as part of a wider anti-terrorist campaign (Oslo, April 2016). Likewise, news stories from Ozodlik have mentioned that relatives of persons living abroad have been controlled (Ozodlik 2016a; Ozodlik 2016b). In November 2016, more than 100 government employees are said to have gone from door to door in some mahallas in the Namangan region. They reportedly visited the homes of suspected members of extremist

² See Landinfo’s report *Uzbekistan: Overvåking av befolkningen og situasjonen for returnerte asylsøkere* (Landinfo 2015). Mahalla is the Uzbek word for neighbourhood. Mahallas are the eyes and ears of the government and are used as a tool to control the population. The mahallas function as neighbourhood committees (HRW 2003).

religious organizations and the homes of opposition activists. Family members of persons who have been abroad for a long time, in Syria, Turkey or Russia, also received visits, because the security forces would like them to make their relatives return to Uzbekistan, according to Ozodlik (2016a).

In a news article of 22 November 2016, Ozodlik (2016c) mentioned that journalists have revealed that it can be as many as 40,000 Uzbeks who are currently wanted by the authorities. Lists of wanted persons are drawn up by the security service and the national police service. In addition to persons fighting in Syria and Iraq, the lists also contain the names of persons who have been living abroad for a long time. Landinfo has no other information about these lists.

Has the situation changed under the newly elected president?

When Landinfo interviewed sources in Osh in October 2016, Shavkat Mirziyoyev³ had not yet been elected president of Uzbekistan. He was appointed as interim president on 8 September 2016, following the death of president Islam Karimov on 2 September 2016. Several independent sources (journalist (b); researcher; NGO; CSIP, interviews in Osh in October 2016) stated that Mirziyoyev introduced some small positive changes after he took over as acting president. The sources pointed out that he had given instructions to ease border restrictions and that entry into the capital Tashkent had become easier. He also eased entry procedures at the terrestrial borders and made it easier to enter by road from Kyrgyzstan via a border-crossing which in practice had been closed since 2013. Theoretically, Kyrgyz nationals were allowed to enter Uzbekistan for a wedding or a funeral but in practice only a few were allowed to cross the border. According to several sources, this system is currently function, and those who want to enter are now required to present proof that they are to attend a wedding or a funeral in Uzbekistan (NGO; interview with a researcher in Osh, October 2016).

According to a journalist (b) who has travelled frequently between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, there were far less controls than before at the airport in Tashkent when he visited the city in October 2016. His entire luggage was checked on previous trips, but not in October 2016. Only suspicious looking persons were singled out and taken to a separate room. The journalist explained that there are eight counters at the airport of Tashkent, for passengers coming in on six different flights. It took about 40 minutes for people to pass these checks. Among all the passengers on the six flights, the journalist saw six people who were taken aside and prevented from passing the passport control. This was something the journalist had noticed personally and Landinfo did not get any further information.

According to the researcher of Uzbek ethnic origin, the changes in Uzbekistan are purely cosmetic and a way for Mirziyoyev to legitimize his power, and is an initiative to get the population to know him and vote for him. It is still too early to tell if Mirziyoyev's election as president will bring about changes to the situation of Uzbeks who return after having resided abroad, but the sources interviewed by Landinfo in October do not seem to have any particular hopes regarding the new president, who belonged to Karimov's inner circle.

The Uzbek journalist (b) assessed that not much would happen to Uzbeks returning to Uzbekistan as long as Mirziyoyev had not been officially elected president, other than that they

³ Shavkat Mirziyoyev was elected president of Uzbekistan on 4 December 2016. He was Uzbekistan's prime minister from 2014 until he took over as acting president following the death of Islam Karimov.

may be put under surveillance. However, the source was not sure how Mirziyoyev would act once elected.

Mirziyoyev was elected president on 4 December 2016 and the future is still unclear. He has, however, signed a resolution lifting the visa requirement for tourists from 27 countries, which enters into force on 1 April 2017. Sweden and Norway are not among the countries concerned. How to interpret this is also an open question. Similar countries such as Finland and the Netherlands are among the 27 countries whose nationals will no longer need a visa (EurasiaNet.org 2016; RFE/RL 2016).

Final comment

It does not seem unusual to be held back at the airport in Tashkent when returning from abroad.

However, it is Landinfo's impression, based on interviews with several sources, that persons returning to Uzbekistan are not systematically interrogated. It is difficult to say who will be held back at the airport. There are many indications that random checks are carried out and that persons who undergo a security check are free to go when nothing is found against them. Sources have also stated that even when a person is free to leave the airport, he or she can still be visited at home after some time and taken away for an interrogation. What will happen then depends on the information the authorities possess on the person in question. News articles from Ozodlik seem to indicate that the arrest and prosecution of returning Uzbeks is based on information leading the authorities to suspect that the person concerned has links with banned religious or political groups. A return from Turkey (which serves as a transit country for Uzbeks returning from Syria) seems to attract special attention. Sources have different opinions as to whether a return from Russia also attracts special attention. Many Uzbeks work in Russia as migrant workers and it is impossible to control all of them.

Periodically, so-called campaigns have been carried out to control Uzbeks abroad by visiting their family members and calling Uzbeks abroad by phone, as part of an effort to control the population.

The situation under the new president is not clear as yet. It is still too early to tell if the easing of travel restrictions for Uzbek nationals and foreign tourists is a sign of future changes regarding the control of the population.

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Country of origin information presented in Landinfo's Query responses does not contain policy recommendations nor does it reflect official Norwegian views.

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Oral sources

- CSIP, ie. Center for Support of International Protection. Meeting in Osh October 2016.
CSIP is an NGO which cooperates with UNHCR and provides legal and social support to refugees in southern Kyrgyzstan. Landinfo was advised by the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Geneva to meet with the source.
- Researcher. Meeting in Osh October 2016.
The researcher is an expert in religious and ethnic minorities in Central Asia, and is himself an ethnic Uzbek with Kyrgyz citizenship. He has studied at several universities in USA. Landinfo was advised by, amongst others, International Crisis Group and Human Rights Watch to meet with the source.
- HRW, ie. Human Rights Watch. Meeting in Oslo February 2015.
- International organization. Meeting in Bishkek October 2015.
The organization works in the field of migration.
- Memorial. Meeting in Oslo February 2015 and April 2016.
Memorial is a Russian human rights organization with head offices in Moscow. Memorial has expertise on Central Asia.
- NGO. Meeting in Osh October 2016.

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The organization consists of lawyers who works with migration, citizenship and border related questions. Landinfo has met with the organization on several fact-finding missions. The organization is particularly well informed on border related matters.

- Uzbek journalist (a). Meeting in Osh, Kyrgyzstan October 2016.

The journalist writes for various media about Uzbekistan. He maintains frequent contact with Uzbekistan, where his has family.

- Uzbek journalist (b). Meeting in Osh, Kyrgyzstan October 2016.

The journalist is very informed about conditions in Uzbekistan, and had only days prior to meeting Landinfo, returned from a work related visit to the country.

- Uzbek human rights activist. Meeting in France February 2015.

The source is updated on the exile environment in Europe, and has extensive contact with Uzbeks living abroad. Landinfo has met the source on several occasions.

- Uzbek human rights activist. Meeting in Bishkek October 2015.

The source is a human rights activist, residing in Tashkent. He is very updated on the human rights situation in Uzbekistan.

- Two Uzbek human rights activists. Meeting in Shymkent, Kazakhstan October 2014.

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