

Chinese-Kazakhstan agreement on oppressed group of Kazakhs

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On 9 January, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan reported that Beijing has consented to allowing a group of around 2000 Chinese citizens of Kazakh origin to leave China for Kazakhstan, while waiving their Chinese citizenship. The Chinese authorities have not so far confirmed that report. Around 1.4 million Kazakhs live in the People's Republic of China.

Commentary

- The Kazakhs' case is related to the large-scale campaign of persecution against the Muslim population in China. In 2014, the Xinjiang-Uighur Autonomous Region opened the first special internment camps for the re-education of representatives of the Uighur ethnic minority, who according to the authorities have been exposed to Islamic religious radicalism and ethnic separatism. Detainees are being sent to the camps for periods of up to three years under administrative decisions. In 2016 the local authorities adopted an even tougher stance against the Muslim minority, and the region became heavily saturated with police forces and vigilante systems. This is a result of an increase in centralising tendencies within the CCP, as well as distrust towards ethnic and religious minorities. The repression is being extended by new measures, including the use of artificial intelligence (AI) technology, to the other Muslim minorities of China (who make up 1.5% of the country's total population, but 20% of the non-Han population). According to reports from human rights organisations, which have been difficult to verify, there are currently around one million Muslims in camps on the territory of Xinjiang alone, and up to 3 million may be affected by various kinds of repression. These harsh measures have also been used against the ethnic Kazakh population, who come from China but emigrated to Kazakhstan after 1991. They accepted the latter's citizenship while not renouncing their Chinese citizenship, which violates the law of the PRC.
- Kazakhstan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced the agreement in response to a rise in anti-Chinese sentiment, which the opposition has been exploiting. Additional pressure on the authorities in Astana has come from public opinion, as well as the families of persons who hold dual citizenship and have 'disappeared' in China. Anti-Chinese sentiments among Kazakh public opinion are rising, and the reports about the repression in Xinjiang have only fomented them. The government of Kazakhstan, which has been

involved in efforts to foster good relations with the PRC, has been forced to act for the repressed Kazakhs in order to neutralise the opposition's criticism and appease public sentiment.

- The extension of the system of repression against Muslims to the rest of China has had negative consequences for Beijing's foreign policy. The mass harassment of representatives of the nations of Central Asia (among others) has brought about a rise in anti-Chinese feeling in the region, endangering the strategic interests of the PRC. In view of the criticism by global public opinion, Beijing has claimed that the programme is a voluntary means of preventing anti-terrorism. However in recent months, the Chinese authorities have been trying to calm the international echoes of its campaign. It can therefore be assumed that Beijing has most likely come to an agreement with Astana behind the scenes which will allow the group of repressed Kazakhs with dual nationality to leave China.