

Dear Prime Minister Renzi,

I am addressing you regarding your visit to Kazakhstan this week. I would like to draw your attention to factors that made me fear so much for my life and for the life of my daughter when we were sent back to Kazakhstan last year, and that continue to persist in my country, which remains hostile to any thought critical of the current regime.

I appeal to you to use your visit to Kazakhstan to underline once again, and to reiterate in your contacts with the Kazakh authorities, that Europe remains critical of the continuous clampdown on human rights and freedom of speech in Kazakhstan and that positive change is necessary in order to bring Kazakhstan to respect its international obligations.

As you very well know, my husband, Mukhtar Ablyazov, one of the main oppositionists to the current president of Kazakhstan, is currently in detention in France awaiting a decision on his potential extradition to Russia or Ukraine. His ex-bodyguard and a long-time friend of our family, Alexandr Pavlov, is currently in detention in Spain, awaiting a decision on whether he will be sent back to Kazakhstan, where he would face torture or maybe even death. Other ex-colleagues of my husband that live in Europe have also faced persecution. Some, such as Muratbek Ketebayev or Tatiana Paraskevich, have received protection in other European countries. In all of these cases, the Kazakh authorities have gone over the line, often breaching the law, in order to put pressure on the local judiciary and the national authorities of the member states of the EU to obtain the extradition of those related to my husband.

The situation in the Kazakhstan, meanwhile, is extremely worrying. Following the tragedy in Zhanaozen in December 2011, when striking workers were massacred, the authorities launched a campaign to discredit and shut down all independent voices in the country. Those not in line with the regime have faced extreme pressures, repression and illegitimate accusations. Independent journalists have received threats directed at members of their families. Over the last months, the very last instances of democratic thought, authors of online information portals and blogs have been regularly detained for periods of time ranging between one and two weeks simply for doing their job and trying to cover various events in the country in an objective way.

Activists, human rights lawyers and defenders are being kept in jail to block them from exercising their rights – trying to promote reforms aimed at improving respect for basic human rights and civil liberties in the country. Just recently, one such activist, Vadim Kuramshin, started a hunger strike to protest

against aggression and ill-treatment he is facing in prison. Torture is a daily business in many prisons.

NGOs, journalists and activists live in constant fear of having their offices raided by the police or special services and their goods confiscated. Any civil activity is paralyzed as people know that if they end up in front of a judge, they cannot expect a fair trial.

This is the environment that people in my country live in and that my husband and his ex-associates risk to be sent back to.

The strong economic ties between some of the EU Member States, including Italy, and Kazakhstan, can and should be used to foster positive change, stability and democratic developments.

Therefore, I ask you not to give in to the Kazakh authorities' empty assurances and façade declarations. Please, while visiting Kazakhstan, meet also with the few remaining representatives of civil society, with family members of those in jail, accused of fomenting social discord while they were actually fighting for people's rights to be respected. Stand guardian of the values that Europe has been fostering. It seems that only concrete pressure from outside can change my country, which I hope to see, one day, as fully democratic.

Sincerely yours,

Alma Shalabayeva

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Alma Shalabayeva", followed by a horizontal line.

11 June 2014