

Eurasia



Tajik opposition activist Sharofiddin Gadoev stands in front of a photo of his cousin, fellow activist Umarali Kuvvatov, as he speaks at the Oslo Freedom Forum 2019 in Oslo, Norway. Image credit: Julia Reinhart/Getty Images.

Many governments in Eurasia practice transnational repression. In addition to Russia, which is examined in its own case study; the governments of **Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan** have all used physical transnational repression against exiles since 2014.³¹⁷

Regional organizations facilitate direct international cooperation against exiles among member states. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which counts as its members China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Uzbekistan, and more recently India and Pakistan, promotes cooperation against not only terrorism—which can be invoked in targeted prosecutions of exiles—but also “extremism” and “separatism.” The SCO helps states maintain a shared “blacklist,” and facilitates information sharing about threats in the region.³¹⁸ The Minsk Convention also facilitates information sharing, and states in the region have cited it to justify handing over exiles. Additionally, governments of the region are prolific abusers of Interpol to target critics—not only those in Russia, but in Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan.

With the exception of Kyrgyzstan, all of the states in the region that use physical transnational repression also use coercion by proxy and digital threats. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and Russia have used spyware abroad against exiles; Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan use digital surveillance domestically, but it is unclear if they have deployed it abroad.

Tajikistani exiles faced the largest wave of transnational repression in Eurasia during the period under study, as the government consolidated power at home and targeted the opposition that fled abroad. Thirty-eight of 129 coded incidents from the region originated from Tajikistan, showing extensive detentions as well as unlawful deportations, renditions, an assault, an unexplained disappearance, and one assassination. Maksud Ibragimov’s case is emblematic. Born in Tajikistan, he later renounced his Tajikistani citizenship and became a citizen of Russia, where he founded the Tajik Youth for the Revival of Tajikistan.³¹⁹ He was first detained there in October 2014; he was released the following month but stripped of his Russian citizenship, and soon afterward was the victim of a severe stabbing attack on a Moscow street.

The following January he was abducted and reappeared in Tajikistan, where he was tortured and sentenced to 17 years in prison.³²⁰ In March 2015, Umarali Kuvvatov, another opposition leader in exile, was shot and killed on the street in Istanbul soon after he had applied for asylum.³²¹

Authorities in **Azerbaijan** also aggressively target opposition figures and journalists abroad. Since 2014, they have conducted five renditions, from Ukraine, Georgia, and Turkey. In four of the cases, the victim was a journalist or a journalist's spouse. Journalist Afgan Muxtarli was kidnapped off the street in Tbilisi in May 2017 and reappeared a day later in the custody of authorities in Azerbaijan.³²² In at least two other cases, Azerbaijan authorities used Interpol notices to have individuals detained abroad so they could be subject to further targeting. For example, journalist Fikret Huseynli, who had received refugee protection in the Netherlands, was detained in Ukraine and had his passport held, awaiting determination of his case based on an Interpol filing. While he was stuck in Ukraine, men speaking Azeri assaulted him, though he was ultimately able to flee the country.³²³

Kazakhstan's transnational repression efforts have focused on political opposition figures and former insiders, especially associates of Mukhtar Ablyazov, a former minister and banking official accused of widespread embezzlement and financing revolutionary activities. Ablyazov himself was detained in France in 2013, before the reporting period, and detained for most of the following three years; his wife and daughter were seized and rendered to Kazakhstan from Italy in 2013; they were permitted to return to Italy after an international outcry.³²⁴ Multiple people from Ablyazov's circle were also detained in Europe, often based on Interpol notices, only to be later released.³²⁵ Several other targeted activists have been linked to Ablyazov by Kazakhstani authorities. In one extreme case, activist and blogger Murat Tungishbayev was unlawfully deported from Kyrgyzstan to Kazakhstan in June 2018, despite having a pending asylum application in Kyrgyzstan.³²⁶

In **Kyrgyzstan**, there is less evidence of a systematic campaign. Four of the five cases included in Freedom House's count involved the targeting of ethnic Uzbeks who fled Kyrgyzstan following pogroms in southern Kyrgyzstan in 2010. They were detained on Kyrgyzstani requests in Russia in 2013 and 2014, but eventually released following legal challenges. The most recent case from Kyrgyzstan is that of the husband of a prominent anticorruption campaigner, who was detained at an airport in neighboring Kazakhstan, and immediately returned to Kyrgyzstan.³²⁷

Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan have all used physical transnational repression against exiles since 2014.

In terms of host countries, Russia features prominently: 51 of the 111 physical incidents documented in Eurasia (46 percent) occurred in Russia. Most detentions did not have a clear conclusion, or resulted eventually in the release of the exile after legal challenges.

Turkey is the other most important host country for the region, especially in terms of extreme incidents like assassinations and renditions. In the last six years, there have been assassinations of exiles from Chechnya, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, and renditions of exiles from Azerbaijan and Tajikistan, within Turkey's borders. Turkmenistani and Tajikistani exiles have also experienced detentions at the origin country's request.