

Natalia Sokolova is free!

"I am exceptionally happy about the release of the Kazakh lawyer, Natalia Sokolova. Nevertheless, the associated ban on her being involved in political work must also be lifted", said Member of the Bundestag Andrej Hunko on hearing the news from Kazakhstan.

This trade-union lawyer was arrested on charges of "inciting social discord" and, in August, sentenced to six months in prison. In September, the judgement was upheld at appeal and was then submitted to the Supreme Court. Last week, Ms Sokolova was unexpectedly released from detention. According to media reports, the custodial sentence has been converted to a three year suspended sentence, with an attached ban on "social activities".

Andre Hunko commented:

"The commutation of the sentence could lead people to forget the fact that Natalia Sokolova should never have been imprisoned. As head of personnel at the state-owned KazMunaiGaz, she wanted to ensure that 4000 employees received additional pay due to their work in dangerous conditions. The company management prevented this. She then swapped to the union side and acted as their legal advisor.

"In my capacity as a member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, I observed the most recent parliamentary elections in Kazakhstan. I lodged a successful application to visit her in prison in Atyrau. I was the first non-family member allowed to visit her. I was very impressed by her as a person.

"I remain concerned about the arrest of human-rights activist Vadim Kuramshin, who campaigns against torture and ill treatment in prisons. On the day after the elections, I held a joint press conference with him. A few days later, he was arrested.

"Forty-three further protesters are facing trial, having been arrested during the uprising in the town of Zhanaozen in December. The organisation Human Rights Watch is drawing attention to the fact that nine further activists and oil workers are awaiting trial for allegedly "inciting social discord".

"In early February, the Kazakh President visited Berlin with an entourage of business representatives to conclude a partnership with Germany concerning the raw materials, industrial and technology sectors. I had joined those calling for the agreement to be called off unless Natalia Sokolova was released beforehand and an independent committee of inquiry set up to investigate the events in Zhanaozen. Yet the Federal Government, in its answer to a parliamentary question which I submitted, commented that it "saw no reason to change its stance on the above-mentioned agreement".

"Thus, geostrategic interests are being given priority over human rights. Kazakhstan is also an important partner in the NATO war in Afghanistan: supply routes for the ISAF troops run through the country.

"I still support the call for an independent commission of inquiry into the events in Zhanaozen. The use of torture in Kazakh prisons must also be looked into. During my observation of the elections, human-rights organisations showed me videos proving that a young man had been tortured to death."

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