



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Briefing

Central Asia: Political Prisoners and Ongoing Human Rights Abuses

Wednesday, July 22, 2026

11:30 am – 12:30 pm

156 Cannon House Office Building

James P. McGovern, Co-Chair

As prepared for delivery

Welcome everyone, and thank you for attending today's briefing on *Central Asia: Political Prisoners and Ongoing Human Rights Abuses*. I would like to welcome our distinguished panelists, some of whom have traveled here to participate in this briefing for Congress

Central Asia often gets overlooked when we talk about foreign policy. That is a shame. It is a region of immense geographical scope in a strategic location between Russia, China, the Indian Subcontinent and Iran.

But it a mistake to think of the Central Asia countries only in relation to those around them. It is unfair to the 84 million people – as big as Germany – who call the five nations their home. They each have magnificent histories, cultures and languages. Their peoples hold their own aspirations for the future.

All the Central Asian states, to varying degrees, systematically deny their citizens fundamental freedoms enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. None of the populations have the right to freely change their government.

As summarized in a piece published by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty last week, political space that once existed in the years after independence from the Soviet Union has since dramatically narrowed. Even Kyrgyzstan once the most democratic of the states, has slipped into

authoritarianism. Without effective opposition parties, activism has adapted and shifted toward smaller-scale protests on issues like housing and property rights.

With rights to freedom of expression and assembly curtailed, we do see people resorting to mass protests to express their grievances. This is often met by a brutal crackdown.

A nationwide protest over corruption and prices in Kazakhstan in 2022 resulted in “Bloody January” in which more than 200 were killed. That same year, a crackdown on protestors in Tajikistan killed some 40 people.

In Uzbekistan victims of a 2022 massacre in Karakalpakstan still seek justice for at least 21 deaths and hundreds of injuries caused when security forces opened fire on peaceful demonstrators protesting a proposal to withdraw the area’s autonomy. We are honored to have **Gulya Nur** here to talk about this.

We will also hear from **Serikzhan Bilash** a human rights activist made a prisoner of conscience in Kazakhstan. He was part of Defending Freedoms Project of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, and freed in 2019. He will tell us of the most recent sentencing of his colleagues and family members who have been advocating for the rights of ethnic Kazakhs in the Xinjiang Region of China.

We are also joined by **Kate Watters** of Crude Accountability and **Steve Swerdlow** of the University of Southern California for their insight on human rights conditions in these countries.

As always in these hearings and briefings, we seek recommendations for U.S. policy. Last fall President Trump hosted the most recent C5+1 dialogue with the heads of Central Asian countries at the White House. They cut deals on critical minerals, connectivity, and trade. Today we will ask whether and how human rights are part of this engagement.

Again, thank you to our briefers for coming today. I regret I have to leave for another engagement but look forward to a read-out of the discussion.